



Why Governance Matters

Stories of
Partnership Initiatives

Governance
 Facility



WHY GOVERNANCE MATTERS

By Naresh Newar

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FOREWORD

This story book is a collection of narratives reflecting experiences of real people, somewhere out there, across Nepal. Some of these stories are told by people who contributed significantly to more responsive, inclusive, and accountable governance. Others are insights in how people's lives can quickly and totally change for the better when the Government acts in line with these constitutionally enshrined governance values.

These voices don't usually make it into formal reporting on donor funding, often limited to numbers or aggregate narratives, into which the real person disappears. And yet, the impact on individuals' lives is the whole reason for the Governance Facility (GF) to exist in the first place.

The stories narrate what it means to work on the front line with individuals and communities who, day in and day out, experience the burdens of exclusion, marginalization, discrimination, impunity, and neglect. They also narrate what success means when these burdens are lightened.

The stories give us hope that day-by-day, citizens of Nepal, including the most vulnerable ones, are edging a tiny bit closer to realizing their constitutional rights. The stories show commitment and dedication from a wide range of actors, across public institutions and civil society, to make the realization of these rights happen. Even in difficult circumstances, and when the going gets tough, these people keep moving forward on the path they have chosen to contribute to societal change and improved governance.

The courage of the people the GF has reached and been able to support, has given us that same courage to continue with the work we have dedicated ourselves to – inclusive, responsive, and accountable governance for all citizens alike, based on multipartiality. Like for some of our partners and the people they work for and with, the work at the GF has at times been challenging, subject to criticism based on old patterns of belief, on faulty information, and on resistance to change. We have taken inspiration from the people to whom this book is dedicated, to keep walking the course.

This story book is dedicated to all the women and men out there who are determined to making a difference, no matter how long and bumpy the road ahead may seem.



Caroline Vandenabeele
Head, Governance Facility

A NEW WAVE OF LEADERSHIP

New roles, new lives: elected Dalit women are journeying
on a path of leadership

Photo - Chandra Chakradhar



In Barghat village Ward-5, a group of villagers gather at the residential compound of local Dalit leader Amrawati Chamar. She has the challenging task of settling a land dispute between two families. She is their elected Ward Committee Member representing a mixed ethnic community

of nearly 2,300 Chamar, Harijan, Dhobi, Muslim, and Yadav villagers.

Elderly men sit on the homemade wooden bench fastened with braided ropes. Young men have squatted on the floor, and the women stand nearby with their children. All eagerly waiting for their Ward Representative Amrawati.

For her, such community gatherings have become quite a regular routine.

“My life has transformed since I was elected as the Ward Member. I have a lot of responsibilities towards the whole community. My family has also accepted that reality,” says Amrawati, who initially used to get nervous when villagers approached her to seek advice, lodge complaints, and constantly pressured her to bring in better irrigation, road development, and made countless other demands.

“People have a lot of expectations from me. I listen to them and try to find solutions,” says Amrawati.

Her elderly neighbor, Dharmendra

Yadav, watches Amrawati with pride. Dharmendra is also an experienced community mediator who has seen Amrawati transform from a shy farmer to a capable leader. “We feel happy to see the big change in her and she has earned a lot of respect in our community,” says Dharmendra. She changed especially after participating in a 10-day capacity building in Rupandehi district, organized by the Centre for Dalit Women (CDWN), with support from the Governance Facility (GF).

CDWN, a forum created by Dalit women political leaders belonging to various parties, designed the training to prepare

the elected Ward level Dalit women to discharge their multiple roles, and enable them to link local priorities to the planning process. The modules for the training were meticulously planned in close consultation with Dalit women parliamentarians, activists, leaders, journalists, and various young professionals. The consultations focused on what knowledge and skills were needed for elected Ward Members to implement as best as possible their various roles, responsibilities, and tasks.

The training program that followed was the core of CDWN's seven-month pilot initiative (December 2017-July

2018) to support elected Dalit women's meaningful participation in local governance. The initiative, supported by the GF, was piloted in six districts (Arghakhanchi, Gulmi, Kapilbastu, Nawalparasi, Palpa, and Rupandehi) of Province 5, targeting 300 elected Dalit women Ward Members of 35 rural and urban municipalities. They represent nearly 33 percent of the total 1,003 elected Dalit women leaders in Province 5.

At the national level, there are around 6,567 Dalit women's representatives in 6,742 Ward Committees. But while their representation is historic in



From a homemaker to an elected Ward Member, Amrawati is already proving to be an able leader for her community.

Photo - Naresh Newar

“There was so much enthusiasm among the elected Dalit women as they are so determined to prove themselves as leaders to their communities.”

terms of the numbers and the formal rules of the game, there remains the huge challenge of supporting their meaningful participation in local governance. This requires both specific skills to be developed and the need to create an enabling environment in the public sphere and governance, according to CDWN.

“A large number of the elected Dalit women, especially at the Ward level, are not highly educated, have little experience working as leaders and are still struggling to make their voices heard and valued by their non-Dalit Ward Committee Members and

leaders,” says Gaura Nepali, President of CDWN. A political activist and a Dalit women leader, Gaura believes that the newly elected Dalit women leaders find themselves in positions of potential influence but without the technical skills and the confidence to exercise their leadership, which could hamper the expectations of the communities they represent.

“The expectation from our communities is very high, from the Dalit community as well as the non-Dalit families both of whom I represent in my Ward,” says Bindrawati Pashi, elected Member of Ward-5 of Kotahimai Rural Municipality

of Rupandehi.

Growing up in a Dalit farmer family, Bindrawati had no idea that one day she would be a leader. But when an offer came to her as a Dalit woman candidate to compete in the elections for Ward Committee Member in June 2017, both the Dalit and Yadav communities encouraged her, and she got a lot of support from them.

“Without the training and guidance from CDWN, I would never have this confidence today. Talking to people is easy and I don’t need training for that. It’s the knowledge of process, planning,

and lobbying that I had no idea about, and I learnt all that from the trainers,” says Bindrawati, who shares how she also gained much knowledge from her fellow Dalit women Ward Members. In addition, she got an opportunity to meet Dalit women parliamentarians who had joined them during a whole day session.

CDWN involved Dalit women Parliament Members to share their struggles and experiences, and how they succeeded in becoming a Parliament Member. Realizing and understanding their struggle can be an encouraging factor to participate in the political leadership race for those elected women who have been facing similar experiences.

“There was so much enthusiasm among the elected Dalit women as they are so determined to prove themselves as leaders to their communities. This was why they were actively



Elected Ward Member Bindrawati Pashi is treated as a community leader by both Dalit and non-Dalit men and women.
Photo - Naresh Newar

participating and learning as much as they could,” says trainer Krishna Nepali. He shared that the training also provided a platform to meet fellow Dalit women leaders from different Wards, providing a good chance of sharing their grievances and ideas with each other.

“It feels like home, talking to family members because all participants are Dalit, the program is run by Dalit leaders (CDWN), and most of the trainers are Dalit, and we can speak frankly about anything without the fear of being judged,” says Parvati Pariyar, elected member from Ward-4 of Rampur Municipality. Parvati explains how she

had been waiting for a training program like this since her early political activism days.

“Not all our peers are educated, and many of them have little or no education and experience. This kind of training was much needed and we still need more similar initiatives to help in our empowerment if we are to take proper leadership roles in another four years,” says Maya Nepali, elected member of Ward-5 of Rampur Municipality. She explains that there are still obstacles on their way; they are often ridiculed for being ‘selected’ on a Dalit quota. But she is not discouraged and wants to prove

herself as a leader.

Maya, together with four other Ward Committee Members (all non-Dalit including the Ward Chairperson) are representatives of 3,000 families in their Ward, and are under constant pressure to fulfill their demands for local development. “I want to use these remaining four years of my term to prove that Dalit women are capable leaders, and I will serve as an example. And, I am looking forward to ongoing support from the CDWN team,” she says.



*Mentor Rima regularly visits Elected Ward Member Sushila Harijan to give moral support and advice.
Photo - Naresh Newar*

Beyond training

One of the key features of CDWN's training programs is mentorship. Trained mentors are assigned in each municipality to support the Dalit women Ward Members (specifically, the training program participants). They visit their Wards to give moral support, share information and knowledge on local governance matters relevant to their work, and provide counseling when needed.

"It's more like a partnership with the elected Dalit women,

“My mentors helped me to calm down. If Rima wasn’t there to provide the right advice, I would have given up this role easily.”

who seek our advice when they are designing programmes, asking for content for their speeches, and how to present their ideas in the Ward Committee meetings,” says Rima BC, who visits several elected Dalit women in their homes several times in a month.

“Rima has helped me a lot to build my confidence to speak up. We developed a good friendship and I can reach out to her whenever I need her advice,” says Sushila Harijan, elected member of Sudhodhan Rural Municipality Ward-1.

Like many elected Dalit women in the Ward Committees, Sushila is also finding

her work challenging. She is exploring ideas on how to help her impoverished Harijan community. In her Ward, the road access is poor, the marketplace is far for the farmers, the irrigation system is still under developed, and a lot of farmers suffer from economic hardships. Her Ward is rife with social problems especially gender-based violence. At one point, she was on the verge of quitting from her post.

“My mentors helped me to calm down. If Rima wasn’t there to provide the right advice, I would have given up this role easily,” explains Sushila, who was visited by her mentor who also sat down with

*Elected Dalit Women Ward
Members designing their strategy
in a training workshop by CDWN.
Photo - Naresh Newar*



her family and neighbors to provide her moral support.

Local community members also acknowledge the mentor's support bringing good value. "We are glad Sushila has someone by her side to give her support. It is also beneficial for the

whole community to have an able leader who has the confidence to lead us," says Harish Chandra Yadav, who belongs to a high caste Madhesi family. He shares that having a Ward Committee Member next door is a good thing for the whole Ward, especially someone who is honest and hard working.

“We are all hopeful of her support and addressing our issues at the Ward Office. And we believe she can make a huge difference in improving our Ward,” he adds. Other Yadav men who had also gathered near Sushila’s house agree with him and requested Sushila’s mentor Rima to visit their Ward often.

While the mentors find their work reWarding, it hasn’t always been an easy job trying to respond to every request for help. Many Dalit women Members of the Ward Committees have low confidence, especially those who live in remote areas. The mentors shared that their mentorship is not really about





teaching or building capacity. “It’s more about reaching out for moral support and providing psychosocial support as many Dalit women are going through a lot of stress due to their families and the communities they represent,” said Krishna Darnal, who works as a mentor for several Dalit women leaders in both rural and urban municipalities of Palpa.

One of his mentees, Sukra Gaire, Ward Committee Member of Ribdikot Rural Municipality Ward-3, believes that she has already made good progress in strategic planning, presenting ideas, public speaking, collecting information, and better knowledge on governance.

*Elected Ward Member
Sukra Gaire
Photo - Naresh Newar*

"It's good to have a mentor whom I can call for professional tips," says Sukra, who shares that due to her low educational qualification, she still feels inferior in front of the other Ward Committee Members who are all more educated than her.

Sukra has only studied up to grade six, and due to her low qualification, she is not able to become a member of the community school committee unlike her peers. But she is not demoralized and has the ambition to become an outstanding Ward Committee Member in another four years.

"I want to be a role model for other less fortunate Dalit women to inspire them to become leaders," says Sukra. She explains how Dalit women should work harder to build their own social capital, which they need to learn from CDWN through their mentors.

CDWN has a strong network of Dalit leaders from the municipal to provincial and national levels.

"A lot of Dalit Ward Committee Members are becoming more confident in their roles but their capacity building should not just be limited to developing their technical skills," says 45-year old



Photo - Naresh Newar

Maya Darnal, elected Ward Committee Member of Butwal Sub-metropolitan-11 of Rupandehi district. Maya, who is an experienced politician and a popular social activist, has built a good rapport among community leaders, government officials, journalists, politicians, and senior Dalit leaders. She explains how her access to important stakeholders has helped to boost her confidence. The elected Dalit women are starting from the bottom of the leadership ladder, and they need to work even harder than other non-Dalit elected members, suggests Maya. “No one will come knocking on our doors. We need to go out and demand attention, become fearless advocates, and lobby our cases strongly.”



Photo - Narendra Shrestha

A person is seen from the chest up, sitting in a large, woven wicker basket. They are wearing a green headband and a blue patterned garment. The basket is suspended by ropes, and the person is looking out over a vast, dense green rainforest. It is raining heavily, with many raindrops visible in the air. The background is a steep, forested hillside. The overall mood is serene yet powerful, capturing a moment of observation in nature.

A STORY OF THE SURVEY

The public doesn't often hear the stories of survey enumerators who generate valuable information. This is a narrative from one of the 100 enumerators who worked with NASC to conduct a nationally representative and statistically robust survey on public perceptions of governance. Asmita Humagain narrates her journey

My journey as an enumerator was both educational and a unique experience. I was part of a significant mission to contribute towards producing a valuable national survey. I traveled all the way to Humla, Mugu, and Sindupalchok districts, where I was traveling for the first time in my life.

Before we started our work, we had a rigorous training and orientation by Nepal Administrative Staff College (NASC) officers. This was a very significant exercise to prepare us fully, as our task was not going to be easy. We had to be fully acquainted with the topics covered by the survey. To get real field experience, we held a model survey, which was a valuable preparedness exercise. All enumerators were divided



Photo - NASC

into various groups. Our team headed to the voting booth centers of Chitwan, Makwanpur, and Rautahat.

During the model survey, I realized there are so many challenges. While traveling, we got lost when we took a wrong route. I realized that if we didn't plan the location and time management properly, our mission could fail. Time management, team harmony, and rehearsing interviews were very important. We learnt a lot from our mistakes during the model survey, which helped us a lot when we conducted the real survey.

I prepared by rehearsing the survey questions. I had to make sure that I didn't simply read everything in front of the respondents. I needed to ask questions in a conversational and simple matter that can be easily understood by the respondents. The survey questions are highly relevant to the



Photos courtesy - Pixbay

concerns related to state administration and government in the context of political and social change, their views about the quality of government services, about the relationship between state and citizens, the problems they were facing, and their suggestions. They gave responses based on their

knowledge, experience, and what they had seen.

Initially, I thought this could be a simple data collection task. I often wondered why the government was spending so much time collecting data. I had so many unanswered questions, and was skeptical whether the government



would ever use this data to help in their planning and how it would benefit the Nepali citizens. But after a few sessions of the training, I got answers from our trainers at NASC. During the training, I learnt both the conventional (filling up forms with handwriting) and innovative (mobile uploads) methods of doing a

survey. We also received training in mobile technology and how to backup our data to prevent the risk of losing it.

Another significant aspect was to be physically and mentally prepared because we were also heading to some remote areas with difficult terrain, without motor able roads and proper

walkable roads. The travel, both by bus and on foot, would be tiring and risky due to difficult and unstable roads especially in the hill and mountain areas. A strong will and positive energy were important to prevent ourselves from being demoralised.

NASC's training program team members shared their own experiences and also asked us to prepare for the most challenging situations. The preparedness exercise helped to boost our confidence. We were after all key to this significant survey.

Due to our experience during the model survey, we gained practical knowledge about how to build good rapport with the respondents before starting interviews. We learnt that all respondents are different. Some could answer instantly, while some took a long time due to different education levels. Not all respondents would be willing to participate in the survey. There are so many things we had to be conscious about if we were to achieve a good survey.

We had to ensure that we presented ourselves in our best professional manner. A slight mistake could affect the image and identity of the organization we were representing. It was important for us to be acquainted with NASC's profile, its mission, and objective of the survey. We had to be ready to face a lot of questions about both the survey and NASC's work. We had carried a lot of information flyers about both, and also letters from rural and town municipality representatives.

The challenges of traveling

All three districts of Sindupalchok, Mugu, and Humla were new to me. I did my homework and learnt about the local culture, their indigenous language, traditions, the state of local economy, and the environment. I got a lot of information by my own research through news articles, online information, and text books.

I was anxious about what would be my own experience. Even though I was mentally prepared, I still had a lot of questions.

There was no certainty of getting transport. There was no road access to Humla district. I heard the weather would be harsh and that could make the journey hard. One of our tough journeys was to walk all the way for three days from Humla to Chakheli Rural Municipality, in Mugu district.

I had heard that the mountain villages are thinly populated with houses built at far distances from each other, and wondered whether I would find the people I wanted to survey. Although we had gone through the training and done the model survey, I still had practical concerns. I was not sure if the

respondents would cooperate, even after we traveled so far to their homes.

We started our journey to the villages in Sindupalchowk district. Our bus was very packed and overloaded as there were few buses plying up the rural municipality areas. The roads were dangerous, and fellow passengers told us that these are accident-prone areas. The further we headed up the hills, the narrower the roads became. When we saw another bus coming from the opposite direction, I wondered how it would pass since the road was barely wide enough for a single bus.





Photo - Naresh Newar

The buses plied only in the mornings and evenings. So, we had to be very good with timing our journey. As some village Wards were quite big in size, our team was divided to reach as many respondents as possible. I went to a Tamang village, which was accessible only by walking through the forest route. I made sure to remember the routes I had taken to safely return the same way. One evening, when I was walking alone, I saw a stranger in the middle of a quiet road, and when he stared at me, laughing and murmuring something, I screamed and ran fast until I was able to catch up and reunite with my team.

The second leg of our journey was to Dolakha district, and we had to reach Bhimeswore Ward-2 of Gaurishankar Rural Municipality. The only available means of transport was a private jeep, which was quite expensive to hire. So, we decided to walk. These were agricultural roads, built poorly by forcefully carving out the hill by blasting rocks. Much of the area had turned into mud-slide

“When we had problems reaching out to the respondents, the local elected representatives sent messages to the respondents.”

areas. For another hour, we walked barefoot as the mud was up to our knees. After a few hours, we got a ride on a poultry transport truck. Eventually, we reached our destination, much exhausted, but our first priority remained to track down our pre-selected respondents in Nagdah Ward of Bhimeswore, a Newari settlement.

Our next destination was Humla, where the foot journey was even more dangerous. The roads were much narrower than in Dolakha. Walking on the slippery and nose-touching uphill road, I was scared of slipping, and there was no chance of survival as we would fall straight in the Karnali river. We walked from 6AM to 8PM to Chakheli Rural Municipality Ward-1.

The local communities

The local people provided a lot of support. Several villagers walked with us to difficult places to reach the homes of respondents. In places where there were no hotels, they organized home stay. When we had problems reaching out to the respondents, the local elected representatives sent messages to the respondents. In some Wards, local residents refused to help and some people even discouraged others to take part in the survey. They accused us of asking questions

that could not benefit them and were only using them for our jobs.

In Sindupalchowk, we were accused of being biased in selecting respondents, based on their party affiliation. Some villagers were disappointed that their names were missing on the survey list, and that the enumerators were making money out of the survey. There were also some local youth who interrogated us, with a barrage of irrelevant questions. During our training, we were told that we could expect such situations, and we were mentally prepared and able to respond cordially.

In Humla, we had no problems at all. A lot of youth, old, and local representatives provided a lot of support. The literacy rate was very low, there was extreme poverty and underdeveloped infrastructure, poor health status. But the way the people supported us was overwhelming and provided valuable support to our survey.





Tracking the respondents

The respondents were already pre-selected before our journey. They were selected from the voters' list with inclusive representation of various ethnicities, geography, religion, caste, gender, age, class, language, and also included disabled people from various rural and urban municipalities. This helped us to have diverse views and opinions.

For every interview, we took permission from the respondents.

We made sure to introduce our own credentials, and handed out flyers of the survey and NASC.

We spent 60-90 minutes for each survey. We wanted to spend enough time with the respondents to ensure that each of them participated valuably. The elderly and lowly literate respondents needed more time to understand our questions. Mostly the young and educated took 60 to 90 minutes. Most of the women respondents had difficulty finding enough time due to their work burden and taking care of their children. A lot of them had to leave in the middle of the interview. But we always waited for

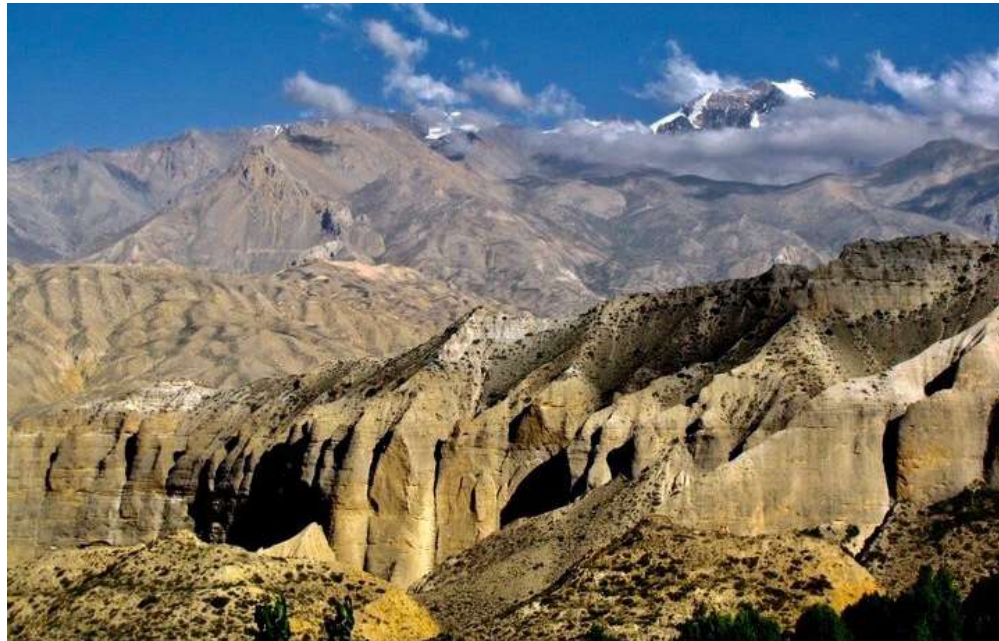
their return to complete the interviews. During such cases, we spent even longer time than we had planned.

Locating the respondents was challenging, as many of them also had names that were different from their citizenship identity certificates. We got support from the local elected representatives and local communities to identify each of them. Some local representatives were so supportive, they even requested the respondents to gather in one place, and that saved a lot of our time.

There were times when some neighbors

The enumerators traveled to also the difficult terrain to reach the respondents.

Photo - Caroline Vandenabeele



(those who were not in our list) tried to prevent us from interviewing the respondents, stating that they were not important enough to be part of the survey. We were accused of collecting information from 'people of little importance.' Even during the interviews, some of our respondents were ridiculed

for their answers especially by their relatives, and neighbors.

In many cases, women were especially hesitant to answer or make conversation. They said they didn't know anything. They always stressed on asking permission from their family members. Many were busy

(This story is part of 'Untold Stories,' book, published by NASC with support of the Governance Facility to share the lessons learned by the enumerators)

with their household chores, farming, construction, grazing their cattle. Compared to the male respondents, the survey took longer time to get consent from the women.

In some Wards, our respondents were busy with religious and social and political events. It was not comfortable going to their homes, and we had to wait and plan properly. In some villages, respondents were shopping or trading in the market, visiting their friends and relatives, sitting in tea shops, and visiting Ward offices for work. We had no choice but to locate all of our pre-listed respondents whether in the market place or any venue.

By the end of our survey, we realized that we had taken every step to collect valuable data to produce a robust survey report. We left no stone unturned to reach every respondent despite so many challenges and obstacles.





Photo courtesy - Narendra Shrestha



Photo - Narendra Shrestha



LAND OF THEIR OWN

A land rights campaign is empowering marginalized
landless families to legally fight for their rights

In the lush grasslands of Baidatal Ward of Benauna Rural Municipality, 82-year old Fakku Tharu and his 72-year old wife Sundari Tharuni have built a tiny paddy farm. Walking barefoot the elderly couple are having the best time of their lives. In the summer of 2018, after nearly 50 years of working

as tenant farmers, they were finally granted ownership of the land they had tilled for their Kathmandu-based landlord since their teenage days.

“We waited for a very long time and have become old but we are happy to say that this land now belongs to us,” says Tharu. The couple enthusiastically show us the land certificate they received from the Banke District Revenue Office, which had finally registered the land in both their names as joint owners. They



*New land owners Fakku Tharu and his wife Sundari Tharuni
Photo - Kreeti Modi*

were able to process the application and documentation with help from the District Land Rights Forum (DLRF), an initiative supported by the Community Self-Reliance Centre (CSRC) in partnership with the Governance Facility (GF).

The elderly couple's land is small in size, sufficient to produce three months of their food security but not enough to sustain their livelihood. They are not complaining. "For the first time in our lives, we have our own property, and that really makes us very happy," says Tharuni. They have built their own traditional Tharu house. Nearby is a tiny

verandah with a big mango tree that provides nice shade for them to rest peacefully, free from the fear of being evicted.

Tharu recalls how many poor landless farmers like him and his wife had worked tirelessly and struggled for so long to fight for their land rights as tenant farmers in Benauna, and how many had given up hope even when they had rights to claim 50 percent of the land they cultivated.

"In 1997, the fourth amendment to the 1964 Land Act cancelled tenancy rights for those who were not registered as tenants with the Land Revenue Office. This instantly created 560,000 unregistered tenants without any rights, many of whom were poor and illiterate. These vulnerable people's livelihoods were placed in immediate danger," said Jagat Deuja, CSRC's Executive Director. He added that the Act permitted the landlord to evict his tenants whenever he

“The GF’s support through CSRC has been valuable towards the institutional strengthening of the NLRF.”

wished and without any cause.

CSRC has been instrumental in providing key support for the land rights campaign steered by NLRF - an organization of land-poor families established at all levels - from the village to the district, provincial, and national levels. Created in 2004, NLRF’s operation has expanded to 50 districts across Nepal, led by 4,718 community leaders organizing and educating marginalized farmers, organizing activities for policy advocacy, and mass campaigning for land reforms.

“After more than 10 years of our

campaigns for the tenant farmers on a nationwide scale, the process of land-sharing with tillers finally started in 2017,” says Homendra Thapa, coordinator of Bardiya District Land Rights Forum (DLRF). He added that the GF’s support through CSRC had been valuable towards the institutional strengthening of the NLRF. A key aspect of the NLRF’s institutional strengthening has been to build a team of frontline community leaders to support nearly 99,133 members, out of which nearly 60 percent are from the Dalit, Janjati, and Madhesi communities.

“GF’s support has been key in supporting

thousands of tenant farmers in preparing their documentation, providing legal assistance to and working closely with the rural municipalities, and doing a lot of research on local land rights issues,” said CSRC’s Deuja. Since 2014, CSRC has been working in close partnership with the GF in the seven districts of Banke, Bardiya, Dang, Mahottari, Rautahat, Sarlahi and Sindupalchok to ‘strengthen economic and social rights for the dignified lives of marginalized farmers.’

Since August 2017, CSRC and NLRP have helped 11,500 tenant farmer families in the seven districts to file applications for separation of tenancy land. When

the date for submission of applications expired in August 2017, both organizations successfully lobbied with the government to extend the deadline given that a large number of the families had lost the opportunity due to a lack of enough information and legal aid. Of the total tenant farmers who lodged applications to claim their rights, over 4326 landless farmers acquired their own land rights certificates amounting to 262.34 hectares of land.

“We are so relieved now that we have land of our own. This will bring a big change in our lives, especially for our children,” says Dulara Baniya in Badiyatal Rural Municipality of Bardiya, explaining that her impoverished family had struggled for 12 years for their rights as tenant farmers. Her family had to share 0.16 hectare (5 kathas) of their newly acquired land with the husband’s four brothers, and there will be barely enough to generate a livelihood from farming on this land.



*For many land-poor farmers , owning a piece of land is more about living in dignity.
Photo - Ajay Maharjan*

But Baniya is happy that she can build her own home and lead a dignified life. “I can proudly say I am a landowner now.”

For many farmers like Baniya, owning a piece of land is more about living in dignity, feeling like a true citizen and being empowered, and no more socially oppressed. “There was a time when we were like second-class citizens. The villagers often made derogatory remarks and they told us that we had no rights to speak even during community meetings,” says NLRf’s Chairperson Lyam Bahadur Darji, who recalls that many landlords often insulted the landless farmers. They were not allowed to take part in any decision-making process during the community meetings.

“Now that we have lands, we have a different identity and respect. Even the leaders are now visiting our homes and want to join our forum,” explains Pavitra Aryal, land rights

activist from Badiyatal Rural Municipality and an activist of Bardiya DLRF for the past 13 years. Aryal is actively involved in promoting the issue of joint land ownership among married couples in the local communities.

Joint land ownership is one of the key GF-supported CSRF initiatives led by NLRF to promote equal access to land property. In the seven districts where the GF is supporting, nearly 1,880 couples have successfully obtained joint ownership over 491 hectares of land through various campaigns led by local NLRF activists like Aryal.

“This initiative has received a positive response from the local communities, and we can already see a lot of personal transformation among women who are now taking active roles in organising regular meetings, making decisions, and being more economically active since their land assets were

also transferred in their names,” said Aryal, who explained this was initially quite challenging. Even the women were concerned that this could create a rift in the family and often hesitated to sign up for joint ownership.

A series of interactions were initiated by CSRC and NLRF representatives, who helped to clarify a lot of concerns about joint ownership. “Many of the families, especially the male members weren’t aware of the benefits, and once we provided the facts, the number of families supporting the idea grew,” says Sita Neupane, Bardiya DLRF member. The families would be also provided



GF-supported CSRF initiatives led by NLRF are promoting joint ownership of land among thousands of couples.

Photo - Kreeti Modi

support for free transportation to reach the District Land Revenue Office and given assistance for obtaining and filling in documentation. Suddenly, the number of families signing up for joint ownership grew rapidly and now a large number of people find the idea very encouraging.

“This is really good, especially for women’s role in decision-making processes. My husband will not be able

to decide anything alone anymore, especially in financial matters. For example, he will not be able to take out any loans without my consent,” says Iswori Rana, a young farmer who only recently registered for joint ownership with her husband in Banke district.

A lot of men were encouraged by the idea. “There are cases when women have been stripped of their legal right to the land ownership when their husbands passed away or separated. My wife will not suffer such a fate,” said Krishna Biswakarma, a farmer from Badiyatal Rural Municipality. He explained how the joint ownership will protect her rights. In this rural municipality, NLRF and CSRC have helped to get joint ownership for 85 families.

“Even though GF’s support was focused on seven districts,

the resource and technical support through CSRC has helped in sustaining our institutional support that could also help us reach out and campaign in many more districts,” said NLRF Chairperson Darji. He emphasized that running such a campaign is costly especially when they had to revise their operations with the federalization process, and the GF’s support had helped to a great extent.

“One of the best outcomes of our land rights campaign has been more involvement of land-poor women whose membership has increased quite substantially,” says Kesh Bahadur

Bishwakarma, member of Bagdahi Land Rights Forum and Chairperson of Bardiya DLRF.

By 2018, women made up nearly 60 percent of NLRF’s members. He underscored that partnership with CSRC and GF has been helping in the women’s capacity-building through knowledge-sharing and awareness campaigns. More women members are taking on the roles of leadership.



More land-poor women are involved in a land rights campaign. Photo - Narendra Shrestha



Photo - Narendra Shrestha



BEYOND UNTOUCHABILITY

An experimental action research initiative has transformed into a learning platform for neophyte writers to widen the discourse on Dalit issues beyond the issues of untouchability and archetypical messages

At a young age, since her school days, Gauri Nepali began writing poems and blogging about social inequalities. She formed her own literature group with her peers to create a media space to spread their social messages. But when she realized their initiative was not having impact in

the way they had envisioned, Gauri was disillusioned. She was disappointed that she wasn't able to contribute much with her writing. She distanced herself from her literature group, and paused her writing career.

"I wanted to become a serious writer for which I needed analytical and research skills to enrich my writing. I wanted to explore learning platforms where I could develop those skills," says Gauri. Such an opportunity came when she

A team of writers and researchers discussing their strategy and brainstorming on how to create space for Dalit in media.

Photo - Dalit Reader



was invited to join the action research project, 'Creating Space for Dalit in Media: An Experimental Approach to Alternative Knowledge Production,' run by a team of writers and researchers as full time mentors. Their idea was to groom novice writers like Gauri to produce quality contents on Dalit

issues and get published in the leading national dailies of Nepal.

"I finally found such a platform that I had been searching for. It was here that I got the confidence to become a professional writer," says Gauri, who quickly progressed and successfully produced an analytical opinion piece in

national daily Naya Patrika. Her opinion piece, 'Constitutional Politics on Dalits,' got attention beyond her expectation.

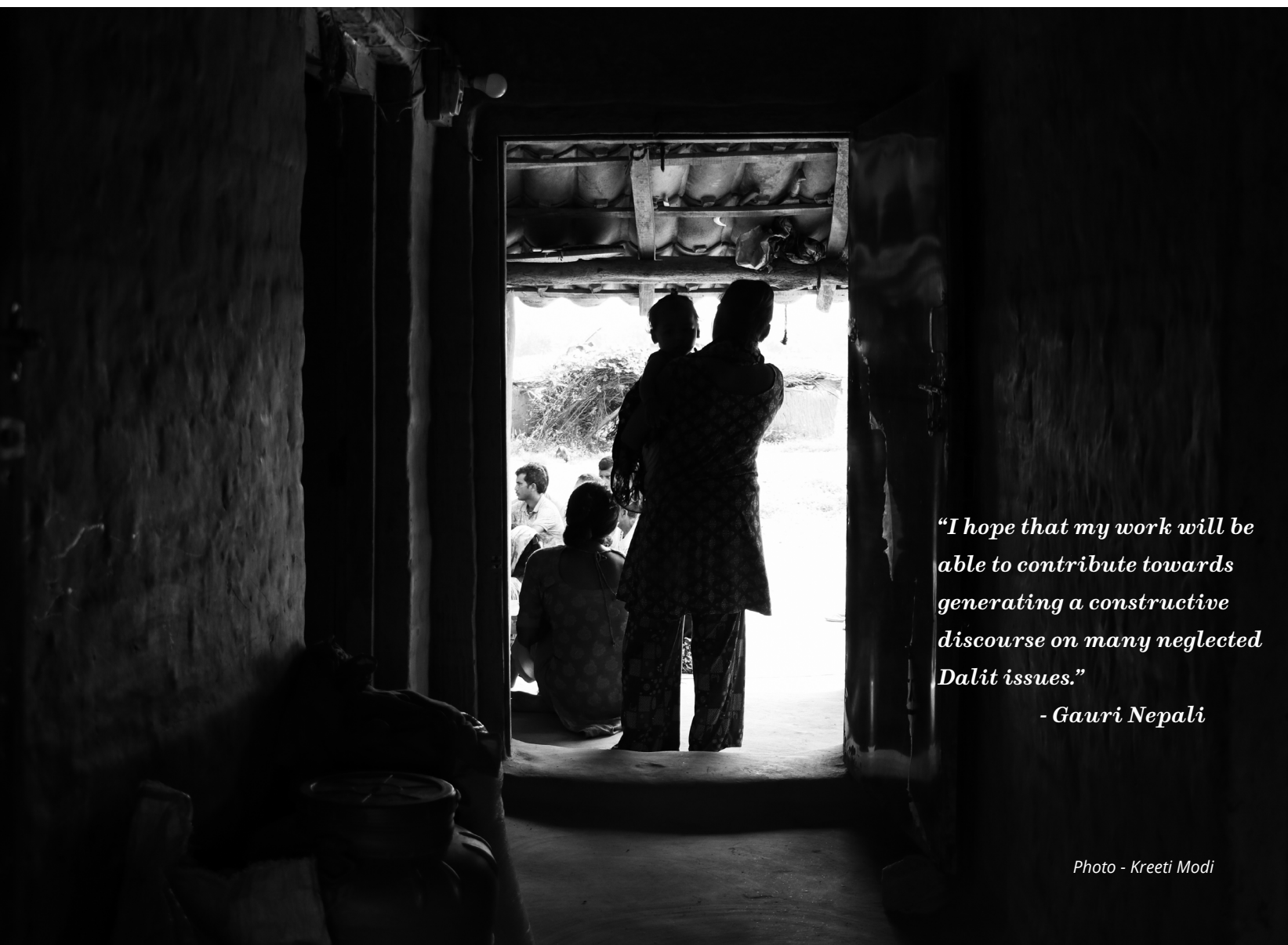
"My single write-up got a lot of attention from so many people including some prominent columnists and intellectuals. This really helped me to build my identity as a writer," muses Gauri, acknowledging that the training and quality mentorship through the research project provided good guidance. She hopes that her work will be able to contribute towards generating a constructive discourse on many neglected Dalit issues.

Gauri was among 18 novice writers

from both Dalit and non-Dalit ethnicities, from different professional backgrounds, to join the participatory action research initiative by a team of writers and researchers to experiment and provide a tested approach for promoting written discourse on Dalit issues.

The research team designed a Dalit Readers' Incubator (DRI) course with a curriculum based on an extensive review of literature on Dalit, Nepali caste system, race, and multiculturalism. The participants took active part in the discussions and interactions with leading authors on these subjects to develop a critical understanding of Dalit issues. They also had the opportunity to interact with editors, desk editors, and established writers on creating space for Dalit issues in national media.

"In a short time, we were able to develop a critical



“I hope that my work will be able to contribute towards generating a constructive discourse on many neglected Dalit issues.”

- Gauri Nepali

Photo - Kreeti Modi

“It took just one write-up to understand the society’s mindset. I made a lot of enemies because they didn’t agree with my analysis.”

understanding on Dalit issues and learned to generate new contents to improve our writing,” says Shusma Barali who has since produced a series of features and opinion pieces. She recalls how she couldn’t even articulate her own personal grievances as a Dalit woman, and often struggled to link them to the larger context of social injustice.

“We need to cover Dalit issues with proper analysis and go beyond the specifics and the usual conversation of untouchability and discrimination,” says Shusma, explaining how the course has helped her to think differently as a

writer.

Shusma hails from Banke district in Province-5 and narrates how the so-called ‘empowerment projects’ are focused mostly on income-generation, forming cooperatives, school education, health, and other development initiatives. Although there are campaigns to promote human rights and raising awareness about social equality, and education programs about laws against caste discrimination, the mindset hasn’t changed much.

“It took just one write-up to understand the society’s mindset. I made a lot of

enemies because they didn't agree with my analysis," says Riban Magrati, who shares how he also lost his non-Dalit friends, who started shunning him because of his opinion pieces. But at the same time, he also got the attention from some intellectuals who complimented him for his analysis.

Riban explains that he didn't have much experience growing up in a Dalit community. He went to school where he didn't have Dalit friends. He started his career in a corporate office, and went on to start his own business, and all this time he had no connection with his own Dalit community. It was only when he

joined an NGO project that he started working with the Dalit community, and heard their stories of exclusion, human rights violations, and many other forms of discrimination.

"I wanted to start serious writing for a cause because until then I hadn't considered writing for social change," says Riban, but he was still struggling to get published as he was unable to produce the kind of writing that would interest editors.

"The Dalit Reader's Incubator training provided me with a good opportunity. With the guidance of the mentors, I honed my skills in research and analysis and learnt how to do a literature review related to our Dalit history, politics, multicultural society, and many other aspects – all of which helped me to produce a proper analytical piece," adds Riban, who was also successful in getting his opinion piece published in a national daily.

Within a period of four months, Riban and his fellow 18 participants have produced 30 opinion articles with an exclusive focus on Dalit issues, and all have been published in national dailies. The participants still continue to collaborate among themselves, and with their mentors, to create more media space for Dalit issues.

“The initiative has resulted into a successful campaign to promote Dalit and non-Dalit writers focused on Dalit issues. We have formed a loose network of a Dalit Reader’s Group who are passionate and interested to continue generating valuable knowledge,” says

senior editor and writer Rajendra Maharjan, who led the action-research project.

Getting space in the media is key to build an informed society in Nepal especially about the most marginalized communities as the Dalit, so that their voices can be heard in the social transformation process. The Dalit still remain the least educated social group, and are among the poorest with the lowest number of representation in leadership, media, justice system, business, and many other key sectors. Their low representation is causing them to be the least influential group in the power play, and that needs to change if Nepal wants to build an inclusive democracy, says Rajendra.

The coverage on Dalit issues still remains low in the national media. Most of the writings still portray Dalit as an archetype, perpetuating conventional norms and stereotypical



*“The Dalit still remain the
least educated social group,
and are among the poorest.”*

- Rajendra Maharjan

Photo - Naresh Newar

representations. The majority of Dalit and non-Dalit writers rely only on existing practices of untouchability for producing their opinions. Rajendra explains that little effort has been made to research and study to understand and write on Dalit-hood, Dalit movement, history, philosophy, economy, culture, art, and technology.

“Active intercultural dialogue is a prerequisite for the cohesion of multi-cultural societies and a policy of multiculturalism,” says Rajendra, adding that this also applies to the Dalit community. Integration of their traditional knowledge and practices

through the media can help enrich Nepal as a multiethnic and multicultural society.

Both the research team and their participants are positive that their initiative will open doors to inspire similar initiatives to increase space for the voices of the most marginalized groups. But Rajendra believes that team spirit, good mentorship, and collaboration with editors are key to creating more media space. Prior to their research project, Rajendra and his peers had started a Dalit readers' blog but they were unable to get enough writers to contribute.

"We realised that writings don't come on their own especially focused on Dalit issues. We needed a pool of writers, and that gave us the idea to initiate this action research project. We believe this has become a unique model," says Rajendra.

(The action-research was part of a series of research projects supported by the GF in support of federal restructuring, focusing on the twin themes of accountability and inclusion to promote voices that can expand the space for knowledge production.)



“We hope our initiative will open doors to inspire similar initiatives to increase space for the voices of the most marginalized groups.”

- Sushma Barali

Photo - Kreeti Modi

A close-up photograph of a person's hands and legs as they work with a hoe in reddish-brown soil. The person is wearing a blue and black checkered shirt and is barefoot. The hoe is a traditional wooden-handled tool with a curved metal blade. The soil is being turned over, creating a cloud of dust. The background is out of focus, showing more of the same soil.

DIGNITY FOR NEPALI FOREIGN MIGRANT WORKERS

An initiative to promote rule of law in the foreign employment sector has helped to protect the rights of and provide free legal aid to Nepali migrant workers



Photo - Narendra Shrestha

Traveling for the first time far from his home to support his impoverished family, Tajat Kumar Tharu (name changed) had no idea that he would end up in a foreign prison. He was arrested during a raid by Malaysia's immigration police who

charged him for working illegally. Although he had a legal working permit, Tajat had been tricked by his employer into transferring him to a different company, and in a much junior staff position. Due to his fear of being deported and penalized, he didn't report this to the government authorities in Malaysia. The penalty for illegal foreign workers in Malaysia is up to RM10,000 (NPR 273,000) or imprisonment up to five years or both.¹

¹ http://www.philembassykl.org.my/main/images/pdf/FAQs_on_Labor_and_Immigration.pdf

His wife in Nepalgunj started desperately looking for help for her husband's release. The manpower agency that had facilitated his employment assured her that he would be released soon. But he continued in detention for nearly a month in Malaysia. It was then that she contacted People Forum for Human Rights (People Forum), which provided free legal aid and counseling. People Forum, together with their government partner, the Foreign Employment Promotion Board Secretariat, prepared all the necessary documentation to request the Nepali embassy in Malaysia to ask for Tajat's release. After a series of deliberations, the Malaysian

government ordered his release and also allowed him to continue working legally in Malaysia based on his original contract.

Support for Tajat's release had been made possible through a GF-supported project, 'Promotion of Access to Justice for Migrant Workers,' led by People Forum in collaboration with the Foreign Employment Promotion Board in six districts: Kathmandu, Jhapa, Morang, Chitwan, Kaski, and Banke.

"Under this project, we are focusing particularly on promoting the rule of law in the foreign employment sector

“She continued working in exploitative conditions, but when she couldn’t bear her stress any longer, she fled to the Nepali embassy in Qatar and filed a complaint against the company.”

to promote and protect the rights of migrant workers, and we continue to provide legal aid to a large number of victims,” says Advocate Shom Luitel, Advisor of People Forum, run by a team of lawyers and human rights activists.

Over the past three years of partnership with the GF, the project has provided free legal aid to over 5,000 migrant workers, and has helped to get compensation totaling nearly Rs 2.68 crores for about 130 victims. The initiative has also helped in winning a number of litigation cases against manpower agencies and agents.

“I’m really grateful for their (People Forum) help to get justice and compensation,” says Sangita Rai who fought a case with free legal aid from People Forum against the manpower agency that cheated her. To support her family in Khotang, Sangita went to Qatar as a migrant worker and found a job through a Kathmandu-based manpower agency. She signed an employment contract that guaranteed a salary of Rs 30,000 per month working as a cleaner in a private firm. She had taken a loan of Rs 90,000 to pay the manpower agency for their services, visa, and airfare. But once she reached Qatar, she was sent to another company



Photo - Narendra Shrestha

and was paid only Rs 18,000, almost half of what was originally agreed. To make matters worse, the company didn't want to pay her on a monthly basis, given that she would be provided free food and accommodation.

Despite all this, she continued working in exploitative conditions, but when she couldn't bear her stress any longer, she fled to the Nepali embassy in Qatar and filed a complaint against the company. She managed to get her passport with the embassy's help, and returned to Nepal to demand that the manpower agency return her money. They refused and threatened her. She eventually got legal aid from People Forum, and filed a case against the manpower agency with the Department of Foreign Employment, and managed to get half of her money back.

Growing risks with increasing number migrant workers

The majority of migrant workers from Nepal are employed in relatively lower-end jobs and informal sectors. More than 80 percent of Nepalese workers are employed in difficult, dirty, and dangerous (3D) works. Consequently, Nepali migrant workers are more prone to various forms of ill treatments and exploitation, according to People Forum.

With a huge number of Nepali migrant workers, the risks to

the safety of the workers are also high. In the past consecutive fiscal years 2015/16 and 2016/17, the Department of Foreign Employment (DOFE) issued 786,564 permits for foreign employment in over 100 destination countries. Trends show large-scale labour migration from Nepal was concentrated in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Malaysia, according to the Ministry of Labour and Employment's 2018 Report². While labour migrants originate from all parts of the country, the majority of them were from the South-Eastern plains of Nepal, said the report.

Despite the contribution by and significance of migrant workers, the management of labour migration remains unsatisfactory. Nepal was the fourth highest remittance recipient, as a share of GDP, among all countries and the top recipient among the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries in 2017, according to a World Bank. Nepal received an estimated Rs 699 billion from remittances in 2016/17.

"A large number of migrant workers in Nepal still lack awareness and proper information about foreign employment. They continue to be cheated at various

² <https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Nepal-Labor-Migration-status-report-2015-16-to-2016-17.pdf>

stages of their foreign employment,” says Advocate Kala Trital, Legal Aid Officer of People Forum, Biratnagar Branch. She shares that there is a need for regular campaigns and through the GF-supported initiative, the People Forum has organized a series of awareness programs and counseling services to promote and protect the rights of migrant workers. The People Forum’s team works in close coordination with local authorities, community-based social mobilizers, advocates, and Ward Members.

“I didn’t realize I was putting myself at risk because I didn’t have any

information about the risks, and I was unaware about what kind of employer I would be working for,” says 30-year old Ambika Koirala from Gramthan Rural Municipality of Morang district. Her family was surviving with a meager income from their farm and they couldn’t even afford their children’s school education. She then joined a local brick kiln factory as a daily wage laborer but that was still a very lowly paid job. She decided to go to Saudi Arabia to work as a domestic helper.

Her manpower agent told her that she should fly through India, since Nepal had imposed restrictions for

Nepali women working as domestic workers, and she would be barred from traveling if she flew from Kathmandu international airport.³

When the People Forum met her during an orientation program they had organized in Biratnagar, they realized that Ambika was not aware of many important things that she needed to prepare herself for foreign employment.

“The orientation really made me aware, and now I know how to prepare myself if I want to work in a foreign country,” says Ambika, who has now postponed her plan, and continues her labour at the brick kiln. The family has managed



The People Forum has organized a series of awareness programs and counseling services to promote and protect the rights of migrant workers. Photo - SAMI

³ People Forum has recently filed a PIL on age ban of Women Migrant Workers in collaboration with other two civil Societies.

to improve their income after her husband found a job working as a school bus driver.

There has been a significant increase in the number of permits acquired by women for foreign employment, according to the Ministry of Labour and Employment. Their increased migration for foreign employment also means that women need a lot of support and guidance for their safety and preparedness. “Women are especially at much higher risks and more exploitation than men, and the risks involve sexual violence, physical abuse, and economic exploitation,” says Shom

from People Forum. Their campaign to improve information and knowledge about foreign employment is making efforts to protect women from the many risks they could face due to a lack of information.

People Forum has been able to gain the trust of victims, local communities, concerned government agencies, and civil society organizations, further adding that in the last three years, the number of cases increased by 14 percent. With the increase in the number of cases, more victims are also getting compensation and insurance through the services provided by the central and district legal aid centers of People Forum.

People Forum has also been lobbying for policy action and has supported government to reform the Foreign Employment Act 2008. They advocated for policy implementation, and sensitizing law enforcement officials, media personnel, and



“Women’s increased migration for foreign employment also means that they need a lot of support and guidance for their safety and preparedness.”

Photo - Narendra Shrestha

service providers on migrant rights and legal proceedings. It has worked closely with the government and shared its expertise as a member of a task force specially focusing on the law and policy reform agenda for migrant labour, established by the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security.

The government has shown positive response towards advocating for and addressing the problems of migrant workers. “With such commitment from the government , People Forum is also encouraged that more positive changes will be made in the labour migration sector, ” says Shom.



Photo - Bikkil Sthapit



JUST CAUSE

An initiative by human rights defenders is successfully helping to get
justice for stateless Nepali citizens for their education

From a very young age, Sweta Sriwastav suffered quite an ordeal. She lost both her parents before her fifteenth birthday. By the time she reached 16, she was wrapped in legal battles to claim her citizenship. Her mother was a Nepali national whose citizenship didn't help her daughter

Sweta to qualify as a citizen. Her father had already died before he could apply for his own citizenship.

Born and raised in Guleriya Municipality of Bardiya district, Sweta's hardship grew from a young age. Shunned by her relatives, even her own family members, she had no means of support. Fortunately, in the spirit of political comradeship, her mother's political activist friend offered to help her. Her mother had died with severe injuries

during the Jan Andolan II (People's Movement), and her friend promised to take care of her daughter. Keeping that promise, he sponsored Sweta's education, provided food and shelter, and also sent her to Kathmandu for further studies. But without citizenship, Sweta was going nowhere. Her ambition to become a certified nurse seemed like a distant dream.

Now aged 22, Sweta recalls how she went through a state of deep despair when she couldn't get citizenship despite all the proper documentation and her rights. But she never gave up.

"I became stronger everyday and never lost hope. My mother would have never given up, and I am her daughter," says Sweta, speaking fondly of her political activist mother as her role model.

Finally, after six years of struggle, on October 2017, she won her case at the Supreme Court, which issued a mandamus order to the government to provide Sweta citizenship by descent on the basis of her mother's nationality.

"That was the day when I realized that there is justice in Nepal even for the poor and the voiceless," says Sweta. But she added that this would not have

been possible without the support of THRD (Terai Human Rights Defenders) Alliance. THRD Alliance had helped to file a writ petition at the Supreme Court in March 2017, and provided free legal aid. She explains that the free legal aid from THRD Alliance was such a big help because she couldn't afford to pay any lawyer.

In May 2018, Sweta finally got her citizenship. She recalls that day vividly. "I held on to my certificate like a valuable treasure. That day I felt like a true citizen."

By the time she got her citizenship,

Sweta was already 21. Prior to this, she couldn't open her bank account, get a driving license, and could not even get a mobile phone sim card. Her key concern was to get a license to work as a nurse and specialist in counseling services. In 2017, she had already passed her nursing examination but was not able to register her name with the Nursing Council, the sole authority in Nepal to provide her a license to work as a nurse. Now a year later, since her rejection by the Council, Sweta will be sitting again for the nursing licensing exam.

"I am very excited now and I'll work hard to pass the exam. I hope many citizens will also get justice like me and not live as stateless people in their own country," she adds.



Photo - Kreeti Modi

Successful campaign for social justice

GF's partner THRD Alliance's legal aid has helped finding justice for many eligible citizens like Sweta. The initiative, run by a group of lawyers and human rights defenders, has helped over a dozen students to ensure fundamental rights, (particularly the right to education). This has helped citizenship certificate seekers who otherwise were unable to sit in entrance exams or get enrolled in technical colleges due to a lack of citizenship

“THRD Alliance’s initiative, run by a group of lawyers and human rights defenders, has helped over a dozen students to ensure fundamental rights, and get them into education.”

cards. Its team has submitted memorandums to concerned authorities urging them to provide citizenship to all eligible citizens and ensure enactment of the federal citizenship law.

“It is really important to achieve the goal of strengthening social justice that THRD Alliance has envisioned. This will contribute not only to the right environment for protecting and promoting social justice but it will also strengthen the law reform process at the provincial and federal level, and enhance the accountability of the state,” says Raksha Ram Harijan, THRD Alliance’s Communications and Media Coordinator.

THRD Alliance’s initiative has also encouraged and motivated human rights monitors to form their networks in Morang, Rupandehi, Rautahat, Bara, Kapilvastu, Mahottari, and Dhanusha districts with a view to advocating for citizenship

rights. These networks submitted the memorandums to the government offices demanding enactment of new citizenship laws.

“We aim to support more eligible citizens to get justice and we have been collaborating with different stakeholders and other organizations doing similar work,” said Raksha Ram. THRD Alliance has been collaborating with the Offices of Chief Ministers, the Offices of Chief Attorneys, with the Provincial Assemblies, and with local level government bodies, including Judicial Committees.



Puja Chaudhary got legal support from THRD Alliance to file a writ petition at the Supreme Court. Photo - Kreeti Modi



In cases where children of Nepali citizens are unable to get citizenship, the THRD Alliance team has successfully helped families to file writ petitions at the Supreme Court and some High Courts. As a result, the Courts have issued orders to local government administrations to support these families in enjoying rights as equal citizens until their cases are adjudicated. The courts passed interim orders instructing the government to allow the petitioners to enjoy their rights guaranteed to all citizens such as their rights to open bank accounts and enroll for especially technical education, explains Raksha Ram.

“There is so much stress not just on our studies but daily lives too. I constantly worry about my future,” says 21-year old Puja Kumari Chaudhary. Despite her mother having a citizenship, Puja is still unable to get her own citizenship. She got legal support from THRD Alliance to file a writ petition at the Supreme Court, which helped her to get enrolled at Pulchowk Engineering Campus for a graduate degree in engineering

“I am very fortunate to get support from THRD Alliance and hope I will also get my citizenship soon,” says Puja.



Photo - Narendra Shrestha



SUCCESSFUL GOVERNMENT TRAINING INITIATIVE

Over 2,000 local civil servants participated in the Government of Nepal's dynamic training initiative to prepare them for their roles in the new federal system

One of the youngest civil servants in Parbat District of Gandaki Pradesh, 20-year old Sabita Pariyar, is among only three women to hold the position of Municipal Ward Committee Secretary in Paiyun Rural Municipality.

Sabita has a very busy schedule

providing services to the local communities, eight hours a day, six days a week. Her job is to help them register and certify marriages, birth and housing, as well as recording and documenting income taxes, and various other duties.

“The work keeps me very busy and at times, we work till 10pm at night to provide services,” says Sabita, who wants to work hard to progress in her career. Before heading to office,

“This was the first professional training in my life, and it proved to be such a valuable learning experience.”

she walks nearly three hours every morning to reach her college, where she is studying for a graduate degree in management.

This is also her first job, which she got after passing with good grades in the competitive Civil Service Exam. Sabita is always in pursuit of gaining more knowledge to make her public service work meaningful. So, when an opportunity came to attend a training exclusively for government employees of the Non-Gazetted First Class (Nayab Subba) and Officer rank (fifth and sixth) of the District Coordination Committee (DCC), metropolitan cities, sub-metropolitan cities, and municipalities and rural municipalities, Sabita immediately jumped on the occasion.

“This was the first professional training in my life, and it proved to be such a valuable learning experience,” says Sabita, who



Photo - Kreeti Modi

“The Government of Nepal has recognized this as one of the best donor-supported government initiatives.”

- Krishna Chandra Dhakal, Director, LDТА

shares that the training helped to provide her with so many answers that she was searching for so long.

“I had heard and read so much about federalism and the local governance system but I was pondering how that could be brought into practice,” she explains, adding that she also got an opportunity to meet other fellow officials including senior government officials from the Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration (MOFAGA). Sabita was among the 2,033 government employees selected for the training initiated by the Local Development Training Academy (LDTA),

in partnership with the GF.

Officials from LDТА explain that this was the first of a kind training program (Read box: ‘Training Contents’ for more information), even for the government, with participation of staff from 753 local government bodies, in addition to 77 DCCs.

“The Government of Nepal has recognized this as one of the best donor-supported government initiatives. It was highly successful as a result of a strong partnership between MOFAGA, the GF, and LDТА,” says Krishna Chandra Dhakal, LDТА’s Director, who took the

lead in the initiative. He underscored that the support from MOFAGA's senior officials, who took ownership of the training programme, provided added value to the initiative.

The training programme had been MOFAGA's top priority when the process of federalism started but there had been big challenges in designing the curriculum, according to LDTA. There was still no Act or Regulations for local government operations. During the initial pilot phase in August 2017, the training curriculum was designed based on the executive orders issued by the Ministry of General Administration

and the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development (The two ministries merged in February 2018 as one ministry) to work on organizational structuring and staff management at the local levels. That was a time when local staff were concerned about their job security, and there were a lot of uncertainties about how the organizational structure and the staffing regulations would be shaped.

"The situation was very sensitive at that time, because there was a lot of concern about what if the new federal system would fail, because its success also depended a lot on organizational structuring and staffing, especially at local levels," recalls Krishna. He adds that the country has already taken a step further towards federalism and the government employees were concerned on what their roles and responsibilities would be in strengthening the new system.

“The situation was very sensitive at that time, because there was a lot of concern about what if the new federal system would fail, because its success also depended a lot on organizational structuring and staffing, especially at local levels.”

However, by the second phase of the training in September 2017, the Local Government Operation Act was introduced, and the fears among staff lessened. The curriculum of the training was revised, based on the new Act. During the third phase of the training, new regulations based on the Act were introduced, and for the third time, the curriculum was revised.

This was when the training gained full momentum, as the participant government staff now had the chance to talk about the new Act and Regulations related to staffing and organizational structure. The best part was that the participants had the opportunity to interact with the trainers who were themselves involved in drafting the Act and Regulations.

“This was the first training where we learnt how to survey organisational management and how to prepare

organizational structures. The staff's job descriptions were already there but most of the participants didn't have good knowledge about how to prepare job descriptions, and how that could make them accountable for their roles and responsibilities - of which they now have a very good idea," says participant Krishna Prasad Sharma, Account Officer of Kusna Rural Municipality of Parbat district.

One of the significant features of the training was a half day interactive panel discussion, which was also participated in by senior government officials. The participants discussed on how they had been carrying out the operations, were self critical and pinpointed their own mistakes, and reflected how they would they could do better with the lessons they learnt from the training.

The participants also had the opportunity to share their



Over 2,000 government employees were selected for the training initiated by LDТА, in partnership with the GF. Photo - LDТА

grievances with senior officials from the Federal Government. MOFAGA's Minister Lal Bahadur Pandit participated in Biratnagar. The Minister underscored he would also elevate the issues raised by the participants at the ministerial level. He said the issues related to organizational structure and staffing were very serious and significant for the new federal system. He said the programme was indeed very significant for the good functioning of local governments.

"Usually, the local government staff barely get the opportunity to interact with senior officials in the Federal

Government, and the training provided a good platform for us," said Ramesh Sharma Paudel, who works as Non-Gazetted First Class (Nayab Subba) in Phalewas Rural Municipality. He added that one of the reasons why the training was so effective was especially due to the professional trainers.

"The participants themselves were very knowledgeable about regulations, procedures, and a lot of other issues. So we needed trainers who were experts and had authority on the issues of federalism, government structure, staffing, general administration, and who could articulate with a lot of confidence," says Krishna.

A total of 40 trainers were involved in the training held in all seven provinces. The trainers comprised veteran senior officials at the rank of Secretary and Joint Secretary who are or had been working in the government system, and

who had both expertise and thorough knowledge about the thematic issues included in the training curriculum. LDTA also provided them Master Training of Trainers (M-TOT) before the training. Thanks to their seniority, they not only had updated knowledge about the Local Governance Operation Act and Regulations but also were a core part of the drafting process.

One of the significant aspects of the training was also to ensure the participation was made gender and social inclusion (GESI) friendly. With GF's advice, LDTA had sent letters to senior officials for compulsory participation of

women. This resulted in more numbers of women participants in the later phases of the training.

"The best part of the training for me as a woman participant was it being a GESI-friendly exercise, with compulsory participation of women," says Manju Acharya, Assistant Women Development Inspector from Mahashila Rural Municipality. She said this training programme should serve as an example to other government organizations to ensure that women's participation should be mandatory. She shared how women's participation is still negligible, and often women are sent for training only when reminded. which doesn't usually happen unless male officials are reminded.





One of the significant aspects of the training was also to ensure the participation was made gender and social inclusion (GESI) friendly.

Photo - Kreeti Modi

A good beginning

LDTA officials shared that the training programme had a positive impact on the government at the top level. “MOFAGA especially is quite impressed with our achievements and I believe this initiative has enhanced the image of LDTA, and at the same time, proven this as a good practice of a donor-supported initiative,” says LDTA’s Director Krishna. He explained that LDTA is an autonomous government organization, and can work independently. Krishna described

the link with the GF team as true cooperation between equal partners, rather than as a donor-recipient relation

“We had done staff development trainings before but we had never taken any initiative like this that has been very relevant to the current changing context,” adds Krishna. He shares that the Federal Government has asked LDTA to assess how the local governments should review and create organizational structure, and how many staff posts to create. MOFAGA has also sent letters to all government bodies in the seven provinces on how many staff posts to create, and to remove

posts that are not necessary in the new organizational structure.

LDTA teams says that the good practices and the lessons learnt from the GF-supported initiative will be effective to take on their next significant initiative, which is to organize trainings for locally elected representatives.

“A similar training will address a lot of public concerns. The elected local representatives need to be able to prove their leadership in the management of their local government offices so that they can collaborate with government staff, who in turn will be able to give the communities the most benefits from their able management leadership.”

The training contents

The training focussed on themes such as:

1/ division of work between the three spheres of government, the Federal powers as per the Constitution of Nepal (Schedules 5-9), the State powers, the concurrent powers of Federation and State;

2/ state restructuring, information to be provided about the process of the organization and management survey by keeping the employees informed about the study, contemplation, reflection and analysis process on what the organizational structure of 744 local level bodies could be like;

- the current situation of the positions at the local level and creation of new posts;
- terms of reference of the current organizations and those to be proposed;
- international practices of federalism and its application in Nepal, services to be provided by the local level and effectiveness of service delivery in the federated structure;
- leadership at the local level and citizens-centered development;
- service delivery
- Gender and Social Inclusion (GESI)



Photo - Pranishan Rajbhandari



HALF THE SKY

A women's empowerment campaign has been strengthening participation of women, especially from marginalized communities, in local governance, decision making, elections and political activism, and community leadership

In the poor Muslim neighborhood of Gauriganj Rural Municipality, Jhapa District, Province -I, Rosan Khatun has become an inspiration for many young Muslim and Hindu women. The way she transformed her life from a homemaker to an inspiring community

leader has also encouraged many women in her Ward to follow in her footsteps.

“Many Muslim women are still lowly literate, lack confidence, and knowledge about politics, governance, and their own entitlements as women, as most are confined to their household chores. We hope that more women will have the right opportunity to be given the guidance to transform their lives,” says Rosan, who acknowledges that the



Photo - Naresh Newar

support from Jagaran Nepal (JN) had made that possible for her through their leadership training programme.

The training is a key part of the GF-supported SMARCO project implemented by JN and its local partners since 2015 with a goal to empower women from marginalized communities

by promoting their rights to participate in local governance, decision-making, elections, and politics.

With over two decades of experience in women's empowerment initiatives, the team from JN asserts that a large number of women from marginalized groups are not properly informed by service providers about gender budgeting in health, education, agriculture, and several sectors allocated for their benefits..



Photo - Caroline Vandenabeele

Empowering women to access resources

“The women from both rural and urban communities still have no access to local resources, which could benefit them a lot, due to a lack of adequate knowledge sharing,” says Dipak Prasad Bashyal, SMARCO’s National Project Coordinator.

To improve the information system about the resources they could use, the SMARCO project has initiated mass dissemination campaigns at different levels through

posters, radio, print and social media. JN works closely with its four consortium partners - Nepal Women Entrepreneur Association (NWEA), Human Rights and Consciousness and Development (HUCODEC), Human Rights Forum (HURF), and Rural & Urban Development Nepal (RUDN) in Ilam, Jhapa, Kavre, Morang, Panchthar, and Taplejung districts of Province-1.

“The low income status of women, especially marginalized community women, has resulted in less participation of women in politics, which is why the project aims to

promote an entrepreneurship culture, and also involve family members of women target groups so that their male counterparts may support their involvement in politics,” says JN’s Communication and Documentation Officer, Ahilya Adhikari.

Intended to reach government duty bearers and service providers, JN and its consortium partners have also organised dialogues, discourses, and public hearings in rural and urban municipalities to make them more accountable and responsive towards the community people.

The project also worked towards strengthening the linkages between district level service providers and financial institutions to enhance women’s access to local resources, markets, and business development.

“In this way, the status of women will improve by increasing their access to social and economic services and benefits from local government and financial institutions,” explains Ahilya. A vivid example of such an initiative can be found in the former Village Development Committees (VDCs) in Sunsari district, where the SMARCO-trained women were able to gain access to a government budget of Rs 70,000 to invest in their livelihood activities.

Since 2015, the three-year project has directly reached 900 beneficiaries and more than 2,200 stakeholders.

“With GF’s support, the project has resulted into a valuable initiative that makes a difference in the lives of many women, especially from the most marginalised groups,” says Dipak Prasad Bashyal, SMARCO’s National Project Coordinator. JN and its consortium partners work through women’s empowerment groups (WEGs) formed at the local level to build political leadership among rural women.

Dipak emphasizes that the significance of the project was born out of the need to address many root problems causing a majority of women, especially from the marginalized communities, to be left behind not only in leadership and decision making but also in economic sectors (Read Box: SMARCO’s key strategic interventions).

The list of these root problems is long: lack of access to education, less exposure to outer society, limited mobility,



The project also worked towards strengthening the linkages between district level service providers and financial institutions to enhance women's access to local resources, markets, and business development. Photo - Kreeti Modi

lack of skills for economic opportunities, poor linkages with government agencies and service providers. All these are causing low economic status and have resulted into very low participation in the decision making.

Through the project, the women

members have been provided with several capacity building trainings as well as exposure and spaces for dialogue. These women have taken up several leadership roles at the local level such as in school management committees, integrated planning committees, user groups and others over these years. The project also supports women to build their political career. Women leaders affiliated to different political parties

***“More women should enter politics, which opens the door for opportunities to transform our lives, and gives us power to make decisions, which ultimately will make us empowered,”
- Jalbarsa Rajbansi Chaudhary,***

at the local level are also part of WEGs.

“More women should enter politics, which opens the door for opportunities to transform our lives, and gives us power to make decisions, which ultimately will make us empowered,” says Jalbarsa Rajbansi Chaudhary, Executive Member of Gauradaha Nagarpalika of Jhapa District. Jalbarsa was one of the participants in SMARCO’s leadership training programme in 2016. In less than two years, she has become a role model for many women from marginalised communities in her rural municipality.

“The leadership training was just a beginning for me. Our trainers inspired and encouraged us persistently, and that really transformed us. I learnt how to give speeches, gained a lot of knowledge about leadership, constitutional rights, politics, economics and many other important issues,” says Jalbarsa, who recalls how she spent a large part of her youth as a homemaker. She was married right after she finished her school due to economic hardship of her own parents. Even after marriage, her family’s hardship grew after her young husband’s father died.

Jalbarsa shares that it was the SMARCO

project's support that provoked her interest in politics. She started her own self-promotion campaign in her community and with local politicians, and used her new skills to gear their attention. She was successful in getting their full support to pursue her career in politics. When she got the ticket for her candidacy, she campaigned a lot with support of her family and friends, and eventually won with the highest number of votes in her rural municipality Ward. She is now the elected Executive Member, which equals the rank of the Ward Chairperson.

"Now, everyone in my Ward are very happy, even the political leaders. I have been able to encourage many women from many marginalised communities to get involved in politics," says Jalbarsa, whose popularity has also gained respect from other political leaders who are encouraging her to compete for the post of deputy mayor in the next term.

"All the women participants are already smart, intelligent, and capable of being leaders but lacked the knowledge, exposure, and opportunities. GF's support to our project has been a valuable contribution for their transformation," says Punya Sangroula,

SMARCO District Project Coordinator. He explains that the JN and their local partner Rural and Urban Development Nepal (RUDN) were able to provide the right tools and skills. The women participants were able to transform themselves with their own hard work and enthusiasm through the SMARCO project.

“Good governance promotes equity, participation, accountability, and rule of law in a manner that is effective. Inclusive participation of women at the decision-making level is the way to translate these principles into reality,” says Ahilya. She explains that ensuring

such an opportunity of promoting inclusiveness is crucial to motivate women and strengthen their voices. They need enhanced knowledge that could develop their skills of facilitation related to local election campaign, leadership, and local governance.

“The SMARCO project is helping especially rural women and I was one among many who benefited a lot from their support. Without it, I would have been confined to my house,” says Bishnu Maya BK, elected Ward Member of Belagaon Rural Municipality of Panchthar District.

Bishnu was also one of the participants and recalls that women would often share the same story of being confined to their roles of homemakers because they were ignored, undervalued, and not considered significant in the leadership roles.

"I believe we have changed that mindset and now I work side by side with male politicians and community leaders, and they have much respect for me," says Bishnu who never went to school but took non-formal education through SMARCO.

"Our capability comes through knowledge, and has to be shared to empower women. We need more knowledge and not just goats," says Bishnu.



Women often share the same story of being confined to their roles of homemakers because they were ignored, undervalued, and not considered significant in the leadership roles.

Photo - Narendra Shrestha

AN EXTENDED FAMILY

Social Families have been empowering local communities to demand
access to public resources, knowledge, and justice



Photo - SAMAGRA

At night, as 200 families turn on the lights in Kumai Tol of Koshi Rural Municipality, Rekha Devi Pandit's face also glows with pride. For over a decade, the community was struggling to bring electricity to their homes but were so tired of trying that

they eventually gave up. They lobbied with the officials from the Village Development Committee¹ and District Development Committee, and also put pressure on political parties. But when their own elected leader was unsuccessful, the whole community stopped pursuing.

"Electricity poles were built but without the transformers, there would be no electric supply. Our men tried

¹ *The VDC offices have now been turned into Ward offices of the respective village councils. The DDCs have been replaced by District Coordination Committees (DCC)*





Photo - John Tyynela

convincing the officials at the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) for many years but we were told they could do nothing because there was no money planned in the local budget,” says Rekha.

Rekha recalls how every effort was becoming fruitless because they didn't have the information, knowledge or skills for dialogue, lobbying, and negotiations with the government services providers. Then came a breakthrough for the community.

A team from the Holistic Development

Service Centre (SAMAGRA) came to their neighborhood to organize a programme to promote the concept of ‘Social Families,’ through which local communities can work together as one extended family to become self-reliant in making their own decisions, and use the knowledge and skills they gain from leadership training to exercise their rights to access public resources. (Read ‘Building a Social Family’ for more information)

Rekha was immediately interested in forming a Social Family. She convinced 25 other women to join her and they

“Learning from the past mistakes of their men, who gave up easily to demand public service, Rekha was determined not to fail in their mission.”

eventually formed their Maa Janaki Social Family. Once the family is formed, SAMAGRA’s team provides a series of knowledge-sharing orientations and trainings to build their confidence. This is focused on enhancing their understanding about their access to resources, how to process and demand services from the government, their right to information, and their right to free health services, and education. This programme also provides exposure visits to public offices among others.

Selected as the chairperson of the group, Rekha advised her Social Family that their first plan of action was to bring electricity for their families. Learning from the past mistakes of their men, who gave up easily to demand public service, Rekha was determined not to fail in their mission. But she told her fellow women members that it was not going to be easy.

Led by Rekha, the Social Family prepared themselves with all the key information they needed for their dialogue with the Director of NEA in Inruwa, who told them that if they contributed 40 percent of the transformer's cost, NEA would immediately install the transformer. Then they approached a former parliamentarian, and pressured him to call the NEA Director. His response was now different than before, and he promised he would recommend funding from the upcoming budget or even get funds from the Central Government to buy the transformer.

After a month, he was transferred and the new NEA Director shared that he had received no information about the decision from his predecessor when Rekha and her Social Family met him. They headed back home and returned with all the members and their families to stage a protest.

"They (NEA) called the police and we called the journalists but both supported us in the end as they knew we were making just demands," says Rekha, whose group was successful in creating pressure and having a dialogue with the NEA Director. The Director asked them to get signatures from 60 families agreeing to set up electric meters in their homes, after which his office would set up the transformer in two weeks.

"Eventually, we were successful in getting electricity in our

homes and this would not be possible if SAMAGRA had never come to our community,” says Rekha, who explains that this initiative was just the beginning for the Maa Janaki Social Family. The social family was also successful in lobbying the Department of Roads to build 300 meters of gravel road, which has helped to transport smoothly supplies for food, agricultural seeds, fertilizer, and other necessary goods.

“Their work in the community also inspired more people to form their Social Families,” says Anantaram Giree, SAMAGRA’s Sunsari District Coordinator. He shares that 48 more

families got together and formed Manakamna Social Family, who are helping their community to gain access to public services, water supply, running income-generation activities, and running advocacy campaigns to promote human rights, gender equality, and other social issues.

“It was very challenging in the beginning especially to garner interest of women, because they were under social pressure not to leave their homes for social initiatives,” says Anantaram. Gradually, with the support of a handful of women leaders, they were able to motivate more women to start their Social Families. There are today 1,721 members running 80 Social Families across Sunsari district. The majority are run by women.



Social Families comprise local communities who work together as one extended family to become self-reliant in making their own decisions, and exercise their rights to access public resources. Photo - SAMAGRA

A platform for self- empowerment

“The Social Families have become platforms for especially women from marginalised groups in the front line to become leaders and decision-makers, and they are becoming change agents in their communities and society,” says Prem Raj Dhungel, Programme Manager of SAMAGRA. The organization has helped local communities to form 1,000 Social Families of 30,000 households in 13 Hill and Tarai districts through its ‘Empowering Marginalized People for Peace Building and Democratic Development’ project, supported by the GF.

“Our vision is to develop self-reliant societies and institutions committed to human rights, democratic practices, and sustained peace,” says Prem. He underscores that the Social Families are working together to address multiple dimensions of day-to-day life and function as socio-economic capital in the respective communities. One of the key aspects is also to connect the Social Families with the local level government agencies to ensure they become more responsive to the rights of marginalized people.

A large number of impoverished Dalit women have joined and are also

leading Social Families. The members meet every month. The discussions and experience sharing during the meetings are helping to shape their community agenda, and they decide on what concrete steps to solve their problems.

The members have also become well connected with local government officials to make their service more meaningful for the community. In the last one year alone, the Social Families had over 100 dialogues with the government officials to allocate and disburse local budgets for various community development works. These resulted in enhanced relations between Social Families and government service providers, and have been successful in mobilising resources equivalent to Rs 29 million. Through the Social Families, 168 persons got skill-development trainings, and the members have helped a large number of people from marginalized communities to start their own micro enterprises.

From Social Family members to elected leaders

“Many of the members have also evolved as local leaders, which signifies that even the the most voiceless, despite their low level of education and poor economic status, can become empowered enough to reach the level of involvement in decision making processes”, says Apekshya Bhusal, SAMAGRA's Monitoring and Documentation Officer.

During the 2017 Local Elections, a total of 111 members of Social Families were elected as Ward Members and are today leaders



Photo - SAMAGRA

in their communities. “After my involvement in SF, I got an opportunity to attend various trainings provided by SAMAGRA, which gradually helped to enhance my capacity. Now I am fully educated about the services and resources provided by state agencies, and I know how to approach

government offices to put forward our demands,” says Maina Roka, elected Ward Member in Gorkha District.

As a young girl, she watched her brothers go to school because her parents told her that education was not necessary for girls. Instead, she had to confine herself to household work. She

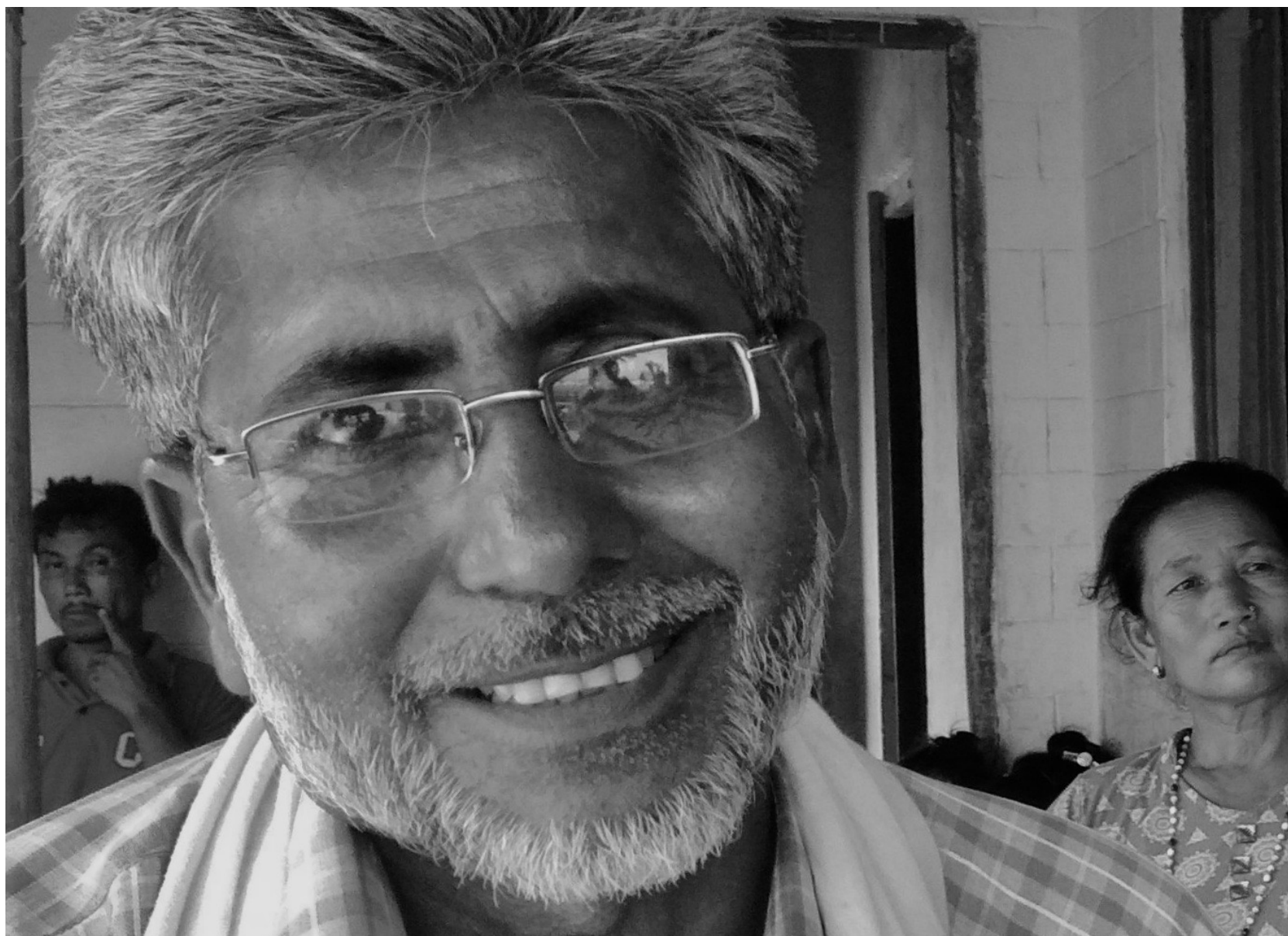
married young and had four children when she was barely in her teens. When SAMAGRA formed Janajagaran Social Family, she was selected as its President. She worked hard to prove herself as a capable leader. She built her confidence through various workshops and trainings on social mobilization, fundamental human rights, and income generation.

Her aspiration of getting education also came true when SAMAGRA arranged for her to join adult education classes. Even though it wasn't formal education, Maina felt that it was significant and made a difference to her.

"For the first time, I feel that I am not illiterate anymore. As the President of the Social Family, I was able to lead my team and that was helpful to gain leadership experience, which gave me the courage to run for the local election. I was elected as the Ward Member and that is a big achievement for me," says Maina, who shares how even the least educated and poor Dalit women with no social capital can become someone important in society.



For more details: <http://samagra-nepal.org.np>





A FEW GOOD MEN

The 'Engage Men' initiative, run by groups of men in Nepal's rural and urban municipalities, is encouraging more men to join in their campaign against gender-based violence

Photo - Naresh Newar

Walking south towards
Yasodhara Rural
Municipality's Ward-8 of
Kapilvastu district, Khaga Prasad Chapai
was anxious how his conversation with
a group of men would turn out. He was
meeting them to propose an idea to
form a against gender-based violence
in their neighborhoods.

Khaga knew that talking about violence against women with this group would not be easy but also not an impossible mission. He assumed that this was a new idea these men had never heard of. These men had seen so many NGOs come and go with women's empowerment projects with a focus on GBV issues. Usually, they engaged exclusively women, and never directly involved men in their initiatives. There were gender-sensitisation seminars, training programmes for women's empowerment, economic-based activities, forming cooperatives, and forming various women's groups. But there was no initiative that was interested in engaging men.

"I thought I should take a chance in sharing this idea and I hoped they might be interested," says Khaga, who had gathered a group of what he called 'a few good men' to give him company. These good men were a handful of individuals who had been working individually to reform their own communities, especially by ending domestic violence that had been rampant and affecting the whole community because of a group of 'men who drank alcohol'.

Khaga, who worked as the District Coordinator of Saathi's project, 'Addressing Social Barriers That Hampers Advancement of Women

(ASTHA)' and supported by the GF, was bent on forming a Purus Samuha (Men's group). His idea was to use local men who had quit drinking to reform themselves, to motivate their male peers to follow in their path so that the violence at home would stop, they would gain back respect in their society, and their families could live in peace and have some economic stability.

"So, when men saw a group of men together discussing these issues, and these men knew each other, the conversation became easier. Their peers tried to talk sense to them and it didn't turn out bad," says Khaga.

“We used to drink a lot all the time and our families had to suffer from our abusive behavior. And, we were hated by our own community. We spent all our money from our daily wage to buy alcohol and used to fight a lot with our neighbors.”

Although it took some weeks of regular conversations which in reality were guise counseling sessions, the men eventually agreed to form a men’s group, and became campaigners to build a gender violence-free society.

“We used to drink a lot all the time and our families had to suffer from our abusive behavior. And, we were hated by our own community. We spent all our money from our daily wage to buy alcohol and used to fight a lot with our neighbors,” says 45-year old Ram Sharan Raya Das, who is now a member of the men’s group. They not only formed their own group but also inspired more men to form their groups in Yasodhara Rural Municipality Ward-8, Kapilvastu Municipality Ward-12, and Maharajgunj Municipality Ward-12.



Young male citizens are also joining the 'Men Engage campaign' to promote women's rights. Photo - Saathi

Turning a new page

Popularly known as Purus Samuha, the members of the men's group are gaining respect and support from a lot of boys and men in their local communities. They have received support from the municipality (rural and urban) Ward offices to run their advocacy campaigns against GBV. One of the key initiatives taken by the Purus Samuha was to control alcohol supply in their Wards by collaborating with the Nepal Police, government officials, and even alcohol producers and

sellers. The group members conducted a series of awareness programmes including counseling to alcohol abusers, boycotting them from social events, and motivating them to quit alcohol.

Some of the members gained so much popularity for their anti-alcohol campaigns that it helped them to garner support to win during the local municipality elections.

“I can confidently say that the men’s groups have reduced nearly 90 percent of gender-based violence in our Wards. The support from the ASTHA project has helped men to group together

to fight against the perpetrators of violence caused by alcohol abusers,” says Om Prakash Pande, the founding member of the men’s group of Kapilvastu Municipality Ward-12. Om had to leave the group as member after he was elected as the Ward Chairperson. Two other members, Shahabuddin Musalman and Uma Shanker Upadhyaya, also left to join their Ward offices but they still remain attached to their group.

“As former members of the men’s groups, the elected leaders can provide more support, and add value to the men’s groups who have been able to

***“The support from
ASTHA project has
helped men to group
together to fight against
perpetrators of violence
caused by alcohol
abusers”***

- Om Prakash Pande

ask the Ward offices to allocate budget for initiatives against gender-based violence,” says Khaga.

The election of group members at local level was a good opportunity for the ASTHA project to support policy making. In Rajpur Rural Municipality of Dang district, where a former group member was elected as the Deputy Chief, a budget of 60 lakhs was allocated to support activities related to gender-based violence and women empowerment initiatives.

“Since Saathi adopted men’s engagement as a major strategy in addressing gender-based violence, our first step was to form men’s group,” says Bandana Rana, President of Saathi. Initially, the efforts to support the men’s group were not easy as men thought that gender-based violence was only a women’s issue. The continuous efforts of Saathi’s team and their consortium partners helped to sensitize the men on the gravity of the issues of violence and helped to transform the mindset of many men, says Bandana.



Photo - Saathi



Innovative and new approach

Over the last two years, the members have initiated different activities on their own to raise awareness in communities, and to establish themselves as role model. They even supported women's groups for handling gender-based violence cases, accompanying them to register cases, counseling the perpetrators and advocating women's issues at community levels.

Through the ASTHA project, nearly 50 men's groups have been formed in the municipalities and rural municipalities of Bajura, Kanchanpur, Dang, Kapilbastu, Mahottari, Siraha, Sindhupalchok, and Dolakha districts.

"Men's mobilization has been one of the effective tools that the project has adopted to change the mindset of the community and turning perpetrators into role models, and change agents," says ASTHA's Project Officer Eleeza Tuladhar. She explains that the issues of GBV had been advocated for for a long time in Nepal. But due to traditional

social norms, patriarchy, and prevailing cultures in different communities, cases of gender based violence remained unnoticed or unreported.

"This is really a new approach for us and very innovative to involve men as partners in the women's struggle against gender-based violence. The result has been really different from when we only targeted women in our women development programmes," says Judha Rawal, Manager of Participatory Effort at Children Education and Women Initiatives (PEACEWIN), consortium partner of Saathi in Bajura district.

Through ASTHA's campaign, nearly 100 men have formed their groups in Bajura district. Many are students, teachers, farmers, local traders, migrant workers, daily wage labourers, and to make their groups diverse and inclusive, they have included members from various caste groups including Dalit, Chettri, and Brahmin. The age differs from 18 to 60 years old so each member is able to work with a targeted age group. Members are affiliated with various committees and groups like community forestry, cooperatives, human rights, livestock and child clubs, so that each of them can also expand their network and get more support from even larger groups.

"This has literally broken a culture of silence especially among women who were afraid to talk about the violence they faced in her own homes. The men's groups are helping to speak up against any injustice," says Judha.

"Men's mobilization has been one of the effective tools that the project has adopted to change the mindset of the community and turning perpetrators into role models, and change agents."

- Eleeza Tuladhar

He shares how the male members have started supporting their wives in household chores so that women have time to involve in social activities. The members of the men's group are also involved in campaigns against Chhaupadi, and they were part of the awareness campaigns that women should be provided with nutritious food during menstruation and child birth. They also support GBV groups to report cases of GBV to justice mechanisms.

"The project envisioned a violence free society for women and girls to exercise their rights and lead a dignified life. The main objectives of the project are

community empowerment to address gender-based violence through the promotion of access to justice along with the engagement of men and boys to address socio cultural barriers on gender based violence," says Eleeza.

*Men's group are also campaigning against Chhaupadi.
Photo - Narendra Shrestha*



A good beginning

Male members of the community are proactively starting campaigns such as performing domestic chores, rallies, awareness campaigns, and they are becoming role models for other men within their communities. Police are also members of the men's groups. Their involvement is helping the groups to know about the procedures to register cases of violence against women and girls. The cases encountered by the groups are quickly noticed by the police and quick action taken.

According to Saathi, even case investigation has become easier due to support from community members. As the group also includes political party leaders, undue pressures have been minimized as cases are thoroughly discussed in the meetings held by the men's groups. Working in close partnership with women's groups, the men are also involved in several women's empowerment initiatives in the communities.

"In Siraha district, where the mobility and social participation of women is still low, the men's groups have encouraged their own households' female

members to participate more in social, community, and political activities, and are also motivating their neighbours and other community members to do the same," says Rajesh Bishunke, District Coordinator of Dalit Jan Kalyan Youth Club, local partner of Saathi in Siraha district.

Rajesh shares that one of the best results of this initiative is that women are no longer hesitant or fear to speak in front of men about their own personal problems especially domestic violence and injustice within their homes. He shares how women don't feel cornered anymore by men who were the reason that they didn't share their concerns or sought information about their rights to economic assets, and especially citizenship.

"I am so relieved that I have a citizenship at my age after I had been struggling for it for so long, and without the help from

both the women's and men's' groups, I would still be quietly suffering," says Ranmukhi Devi Thakur from Navarajpur Rural Municipality. Twelve years had passed since her husband had died and she was unable to obtain her citizenship because her husband's family refused to give any support and was against it. The men's group collaborated with the women's group to pressure the family and threatened to take legal action against them. Eventually, they agreed and helped to make her citizenship, which helped Ranmukhi to get a widow's allowance and put her children through government school. She will also have

legal rights to her dead husband's property property.

Despite some success with their initiative, the men's group still face challenges especially from conservative groups in their communities who are accusing them of causing social disharmony and disrupting family traditions by provoking women to demand for their rights.

"But there has been improvement in the social mindset. I was once called my wife's puppet and many people discouraged us from forming the men's group by constantly ridiculing us. But today, a lot of those people are on our side when we told them that we are fighting for the betterment of our daughters, our wives, and our sisters," says Ram Govind Yadav, Chairperson of the men's group of Navarajpur Rural Municipality.



Photo - Narendra Shrestha

A close-up, high-resolution photograph of a woman's face, focusing on her right eye and forehead. She has a bindi on her forehead and a small tear is visible on her cheek. The background is a soft, out-of-focus brown.

THE COMMUNITY MEDIATORS

A collaborative initiative by a group of Civil Society Organisations is training community-based mediators to help increase access to justice, focused on marginalised communities and women

In Joshipur Rural Municipality of Kailali District, the local Tharu community was on the verge of a major conflict over the choice of their Bhalmansa, Tharu's traditional justice provider. This is a coveted position in Tharu society - equal to the rank of the community's chieftain - and with two

candidates, the situation was getting tense.

Luckily, the dispute was resolved before it got out of hand through the tactful mediation by Geeta Kathariya and her fellow mediators. They helped to facilitate a dialogue between the community leaders, and after a rigorous negotiation, the leaders came to an understanding. One of the Bhalmansas agreed to step down for the sake of restoring peace in their Ward.

“This is a very challenging job but also reWarding when we are able to bring peace between disputing groups,” says Geeta, elected Vice Chairperson of Joshipur Rural Municipality Ward-2, where she is the Head of the Judicial Committee.

Geeta shares how the Community Mediation Programme, led by the Melmilap Alliance, trained her and several Joshipur’s Judicial Committee Members of to become skilled mediators. It was their mediation skills that helped to avoid conflict among the 1500 Tharu villagers of Joshipur.

The Melmilap Alliance comprises the Rural Women’s Development and Unity Centre (RUWDUC), the Institute for Governance and Development (IGD), the Forum for the Protection of Public Interest (PRO PUBLIC), and other members. The Alliance, officially recognized by the Mediation Council and Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development (MoFALD), has been implementing ‘Strengthening Access to Justice for Women and Marginalized groups through Community Mediation’ (A2J-WOMCOM) with support of the GF.

“Our key aim is to build the foundation for better access to justice especially for the socially and economically marginalised communities by building their capacity in mediation skills, so that they can solve the disputes within their communities,” says Pinky Singh Rana, Member of RUWDUC.

Towards leadership

Community mediation in rural Wards such as Joshipur is proving to be an effective alternative dispute resolution mechanism, facilitated by community mediators, to ensure that the disputants come to a consensual and informed agreement. The community mediators are selected by the local communities; they are people the communities trust, who can speak their language, and understand their culture and ways of life.

After the mediators are selected, they are provided community mediation training by Melmilap Alliance. The community mediation training is based on the training manual developed by the constitutionally-mandated Mediation Council. Future mediators learn about the methods of dispute resolution, facilitating dialogues, communications skills, and the various steps of mediation.

Once they are ready, they start looking at the cases registered at the Community Mediation Service Centres (CMSCs), stationed inside the Rural Municipality Ward offices. With support

from the GF, Melmilap Alliance has helped to establish 28 CMSCs in 35 municipalities and rural Municipalities in seven districts: Chitwan, Dadeldhura, Dhanusha, Doti, Kailali, Sarlahi, and Tanahu.

“The mediators have been playing significant roles in resolving domestic disputes, land issues, community forestry, marriage, and many others,” says Kamal Rawal, Project Coordinator of A2J-WOMCOM.

Around 1806 cases have been registered with Community Mediation Centres (CMC) from September, 2016 till date, and 1593 cases have been mediated successfully by the mediators. There are 60 female mediators and 68 community mediators from marginalized groups involved in mediation processes. The growing percentage of female mediators and mediators from marginalized groups has had a positive impact on access

to justice. In 2018 alone, 772 disputes were registered with 56 CMCs. Among the disputants, 49 percent represented women and 52.6 percent represented marginalized communities, according to the data recorded by RUWDUC. Up to June 2018, an estimated 654 cases were successfully mediated by 612 mediators.

Some disputed cases are being referred to the CMCs by various public bodies including the Ward Offices, Women Development Offices, Police Offices, Land Revenue Offices and even the Courts.

“A mediator’s work is a very challenging job because our main goal is to make sure that our support ends in reconciliation between the disputing parties. If we don’t have a good sense of social justice and a real passion for what we do, then we should not become mediators,” says Geeta.

A single case sometimes takes just a day, or could stretch for months of mediation. This is why the mediator has to be persistent and eventually mediate in a such way where both individuals or parties can have a win-win situation, explains Geeta.

“Most of the time, our job can get exhausting but I feel that it’s very rewarding especially when we see the joy in their eyes. There are so many beneficiaries who offer to organize a feast and even offer money for our service but we politely refuse,” she adds.

The community mediation work has also helped to develop leadership capacity, which in turn helped several of the mediators to gain enough confidence and popularity to contest in the 2017 local elections during which 32 mediators have been elected.



Photo - Caroline Vandenabeele

Ownership by government bodies growing

“RUWDUC and its partners are really doing excellent work in settling disputes. Their initiative has gained a lot of attention, and even the government has recognized the effectiveness of their mediation work,” says Ganesh Prasad Bhatta, Head of the Community Mediation of Dadeldhura District Coordination Committee (DCC).

Ganesh explains how their mediation programme has been especially supporting in reducing the caseloads for

the Judicial Committees. He suggests that a lot of Judicial Committee Members need more training through capacity-building programmes to enhance their skills and knowledge on mediation. He shares how a lot of organizations had come and gone in the rural areas for Judicial Committee Members but didn't prove to be effective.

"A lot of their trainings methods lacked uniformity as they were testing so many approaches and trying different models. Our concern is that there should be a clear focus on one model that will work effectively, and the way Melmilap Alliance does the training has proven

most effective," adds Ganesh.

The Local Governance Act, 2017 spells out in its Section 47 the jurisdiction of the Judicial Committee at the rural municipality and municipality level to administer, facilitate, and support dispute resolution at the local level. There is still a lack of in-depth knowledge of community mediation among Judicial Committee Members. Melmilap Alliance has been orienting the Judicial Committee Members.

The local government bodies have also recognized the value of the Melmilap Alliance's initiative, and the sense of ownership is growing. The Ward Advisory Committees, which were formed under elected Ward Chairs, have been especially supportive in certifying community mediators for the Judicial Committees, and have allocated budget in 48 Wards of 56 working areas of A2J-WOMCOM project. The budget is being



used for transportation and communication cost for the mediators to conduct mediation sessions.

The Ward Offices and Ward Advisory Committees are also referring cases to the CMSCs. “The Ward Advisory Committees, which have been formed under the elected Ward Chairs will support in ownership, relevance, and sustainability of the project”, says Kamal Singh Mali, Coordinator of the Community Mediation Program in Ganyapdhura Rural Municipality of Dadeldhura District.

The Melmilap Alliance’s initiative is helping to build the foundation for better access to justice for a lot of women from the socially and economically marginalised communities.

Photo - Caroline Vandenabeele

A matter of trust

One of the key reasons why the mediation programme has worked effectively is the strength of the partnerships between RUWDUC, IGD, and PRO PUBLIC, says Pinky. Each partner brings in unique knowledge and expertise, based on their years of experience for realizing social transformation. Each has its own expertise, with RUWDUC focused on Gender and Social Inclusion (GESI) and Gender Based Violence (GBV), PRO PUBLIC focused on legal aspects, and IGD focused on

good governance. Their combined efforts have helped to enhance access to justice for the people, in particular, women and marginalized groups.

“The GF-support has helped us to largely achieve our goals at the community level. As a result, the disputes have reduced, based on the feedback from community-based mediators. They have been sharing stories about the attitudinal change in their communities, who are really seeing the value of mediation,” says Ram Chabila Yadav, PRO PUBLIC’s District Coordinator in Dhanusha.



*The value of mediation is growing in the community.
Photo - RUWDUC*



Promoting mediation services

“Over the years of working in community mediation, I feel that being a mediator is better than being a lawyer,” says Ganesh Kadayat, District Coordinator of RUWDUC in Kailali. Advocate Ganesh has been working as a community mediator for many years, and he feels that this work has turned him into a better lawyer. “Lawyers have no choice but to be one-sided because you are representing one client. But as mediator, I can’t take sides and I represent both parties, and I find that more

satisfying,” says Ganesh, who explains how GF’s support to the initiative has helped to continue the work of community mediation.

However, he believes that there is still a need to raise a lot of awareness in Nepal not just among the public but also among elected leaders, lawmakers, policy makers, journalists, and academicians to increase access to justice for women and marginalized groups.

In a baseline survey of 2016 by Melmilap Alliance, their overall findings indicated that access to justice for marginalized

groups and women is more challenging than for other community members. A large number of women said that accessing justice in case of gender-based violence was very difficult. Their findings also indicated that a significant number of women do not know about community mediation service, and they have no clear understanding on where such services are available.

They also found that 60 percent of respondents claimed to have encountered some type of dispute in their lifetime but only five percent had accessed community mediation services to settle such disputes. To promote the



*Community mediation in rural Wards is proving to be an effective alternative dispute resolution mechanism, facilitated by community mediators.
Photo - RUWDUC*



benefits of mediation, Melmilap Alliance has published reader-friendly calendars to get the attention of the communities. The calendars provide information on community mediation, its processes, importance, names, and contact details of the community mediators in the project areas.

Besides this, the mediators believe ownership by the relevant government bodies is also key to adding value to the mediation work. In this context, Melmilap Alliance has been involving major stakeholders such as the DCCs, municipalities, rural municipalities and other stakeholders whose ownership at

the local level will support in sustaining the program.

“Consistent coordination is needed with relevant stakeholders - elected representatives, Rural Municipalities, Municipalities, and Wards as well as District Coordination Committee Members who contribute in the planning of activities,” says Pinky. She adds that the Melmilap Alliance had approached representatives of these stakeholders for their active participation in project activities, which has created positive results. One of the direct outcomes is the allocation of budget for mediation programs in eight Wards of Dhanusha, Sarlahi and Dadeldhura districts.

Motivating mediators

Pinky explains that the mediators have to be constantly motivated by new training, exposures, and support of the communities and local governments. The majority of the mediators have only attended the basic mediation training. Mediators need more trainings in leadership, community mobilization, appreciative inquiry, legal provisions of related existing laws in Nepal, human rights, gender equality, etc. However, a more intensive understanding is needed on gender-based violence, domestic violence and discriminatory practices against women and marginalized communities to enable mediators to easily mediate even the more complicated cases.





Photo - RUWDUC

BUILDING AN INFORMED SOCIETY

The National Information Commission's Suchana Project-II is supporting the Government of Nepal's efforts to build citizen-state engagement in information-sharing



Photo - Subha Ghale

For elderly citizen Munna Devi Banneni of Nepalgunj, she never expected that a day would come when she would be able to use the power of information to get justice. For many years, she had been paying water tax to the government even when there was no water supply at her household.

Then on 15 February, she heard the good news that the Banke High Court had issued an order to the Nepal Water Supply Corporation (NWSC) to exempt taxation on consumers who were not getting water through the government water pipeline. But she was unsure if the High Court Order had been implemented. In the nick of time, she heard about the Right to Information (RTI) Act through an orientation programme by a local NGO, Information

and Human Rights Research Centre (IHRC).

So, on 26 April, 2017, Munna Devi went straight to NWSC, and used her RTI to find if the NWSC officials had implemented the High Court's order. Despite following the RTI procedure properly, she was unable to get information from NWSC. Then, she complained to the Chief District Officer (CDO) Rabilal Panthi for help. The CDO immediately enquired with NWSC about her RTI request and asked to cooperate with Munna Devi. NWSC swiftly shared information with Munna Devi assuring her that the High Court Order would be

implemented soon, and she no longer had to pay water tax until there was water in her household tap.

Ritesh Prasad Kesari from Bara District's Kalaiya Municipality also shares his story about the power of information that benefitted his Dalit friends. He shares how a school principal in his Ward was suspected of denying scholarships to the Dalit and girl students. Using his RTI, he demanded information about how many students had received scholarships in the past three years. Shunning his request, the school principal asked him to leave. Ritesh was persistent to use his RTI, angering the school principal who shut down the school for five days. The principal even called the police to arrest Ritesh on a bogus charge.

Ritesh knew his rights, and remained determined. He was released by the police after they got educated by Ritesh

about the RTI Act. During the time, the principal was buying time, and hurriedly gave away the government scholarships to all Dalit and girl students. But he still refused to divulge all the details. Ritesh appealed this case at National Information Commission (NIC),¹ which in turn its order to the principal, who eventually released a 98-page document detailing the names and addresses of 83 students who got the scholarship.

NIC sent its representative to put pressure on the principal, who eventually released a 98-page document detailing the names and addresses of 83 students who got the scholarship.

“We have many examples of how the citizens are increasingly becoming aware, and using their rights to demand information from the public bodies. It is our hope that the RTI initiatives will contribute in creating an informed Nepali society,” says Krishna Hari Baskota, Chief Commissioner of National Information Commission (NIC), an independent government body that is taking a lead in implementing the RTI Act (2017).

The Chief Commissioner shares that the number of citizens demanding information from the public institutions and the government bodies has increased remarkably. Over the last three years, nearly 50,000 Nepali citizens had received information from various public bodies by using their RTI. He underscored that the demand for information grew more since it started implementing ‘Support to Championing National Capacity for Right to Information in Nepal (SUCHANA)

1 NIC is mandated to protect, promote and enforce the RTI law. It is empowered to hear and adjudicate cases under the RTI Act. The Commission has a mandate to issue orders to the public bodies, and recommend the government and other public bodies on issues related to RTI. It can also impose fine and compensation, make necessary orders and can prescribe timeframe to public bodies to provide information.

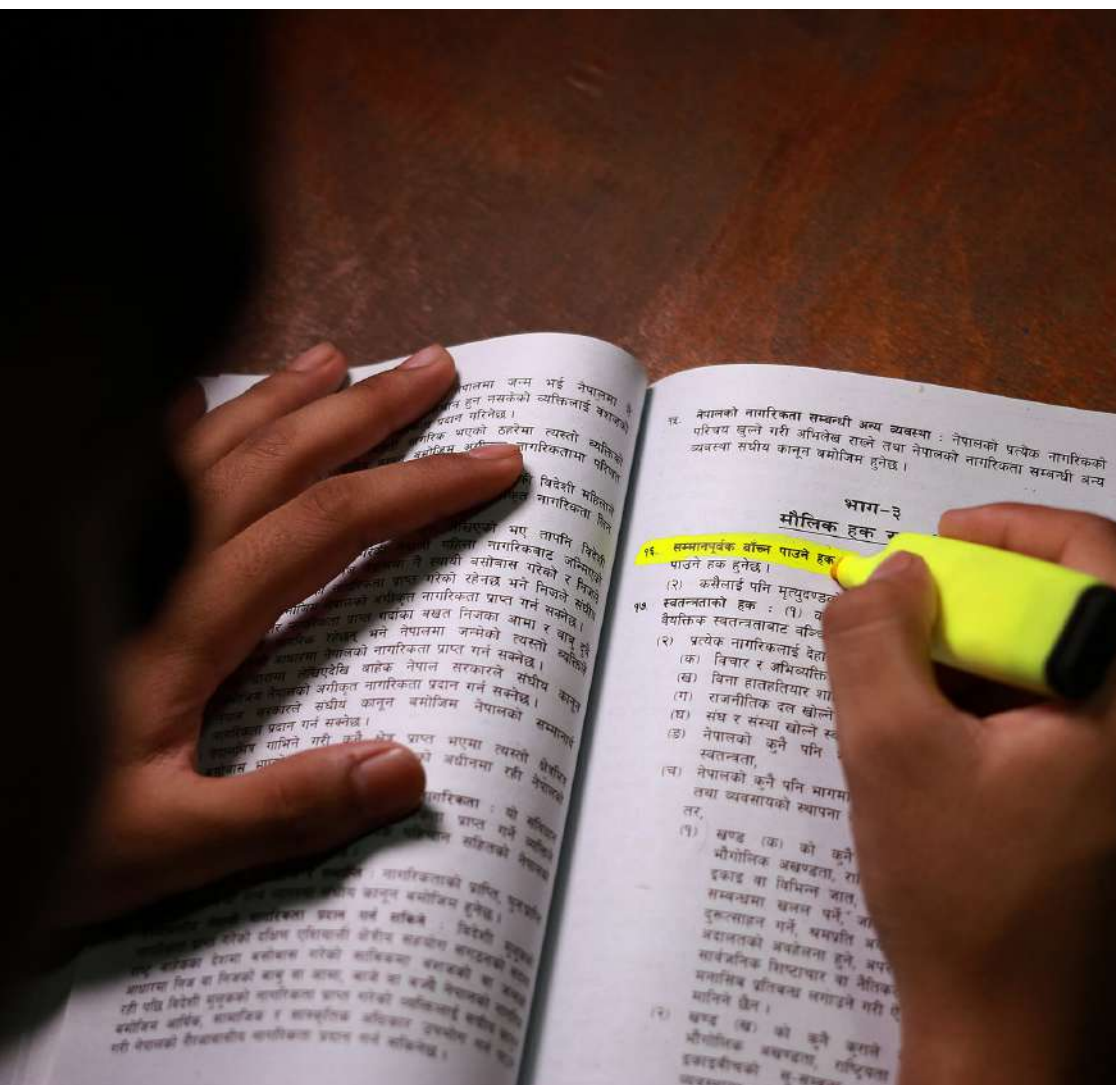


Photo - Bikkil Sthapit

II' project, supported by the Governance Facility (GF) since 2016.

SUCHANA II, which follows the legacy of GF-supported SUCHANA I (2014-2015), is aimed at making the public bodies (Read Public Bodies/Institutions) more responsive towards the citizens' demand for timely information and proactive disclosure. It supports NIC's National Strategic Plan of Action (2015-2020) to improve the RTI in practice with three strategic priorities: i/ empower the demand side, ii/ strengthen the supply side, and iii/ develop NIC's capacity to implement RTI Act.

“The numbers are evident enough to prove that the project is making significant progress to promote RTI with the GF’s support,” says Krishna Hari. He added that project had also helped to support the government units from the central to the provincial, and local municipality, and rural municipality level offices to implement the RTI Act.

As a result, between 2017-2018 alone, nearly 2,200 out of 2,500 federal level government offices (about 90 percent of the offices) across the country have appointed PIOs. The CDOs have been delegated powers through NIC to implement cases under the RTI Act in

their districts. Nearly 66 out of 77 CDOs have sent in the best practices of RTI in their districts to NIC. The numbers suggest that over 90 percent of the CDOs have been active in implementing and promoting RTI.

In addition, NIC also allocated budget for Nepal’s postal offices in 77 districts through SUCHANA I and II to inspect and monitor RTI activities. As a result, 66 postal offices have been sent in their annual reports on the RTI progress. A key part of the RTI Act is also to ensure that the government bodies are being proactive in sharing information without waiting for the citizens to demand for information of public importance. So far, 775 out of 2500 offices have made Proactive Disclosures² on a regular basis.

2 Proactive disclosure refers to information related with respective public agencies to be published in the interval of every three months for public



"It was especially with the GF's support that NIC could make headway progress in implementing RTI activities, and this has contributed towards NIC's institutional strengthening,"

Chief Commissioner, NIC
Krishna Hari Baskota

Building a new culture: Citizens demand information

NIC wants to inculcate the idea that the first barrier to building an informed society in Nepal is to break the old culture of the State's control over information. "During the past autocratic and feudal regimes, people neither had the right to demand information nor the State deemed responsible to share information," says Deepa Bohara, Deputy Mayor of Aathabis Municipality of Karnali Pradesh.

Deepa explains how the local communities still hesitate to

demand information from the government bodies. Many local residents worry that asking for information would hamper their relations with the local government staff and officials, many of whom are also their family members, relatives, neighbors, and acquaintances.

In a close-knit community like Aathabis, using the RTI is not so easy even if they have every right to demand information, says Deputy Mayor Deepa. But she explains how that can be changed. Elected leaders and the government staff have the responsibility to educate the communities about their right to

demand any information from the public bodies. They have every right to know about their entitlements and benefits, local government budgets, project planning and implementation.

Deepa and her team at Aathabis Municipality Office have been supplying regular information about the RTI to Ward offices, schools, NGOs, cooperative offices, and several other platforms. Her office has been regularly making Proactive Disclosures of necessary information on a monthly basis. She constantly encourages community members to be part of their Municipality Office meetings. “We give space to the community members, and ask them to take the opportunity to throw questions at any official, who are present during the meetings. In that way, the communities are gradually gaining confidence to demand information,” says Deepa.



A lot of Nepali women are using their rights to demand information about their entitlements and benefits from the government.

Photo - Kreeti Modi

Partnership with Nepali journalists

“NIC has geared up its efforts and targeted its activities to raise peoples’ awareness campaign through the interactions and TOT programme for journalists, and also targeted demand-side stakeholder programmes in all the seven provinces.”

Information Commissioner, NIC
Kiran Kumar Pokhrel

Journalists are also actively encouraging their own communities to be more proactive in demanding for information. “As journalists working in rural areas, we have to be innovative on how we can play the role of messengers for making local communities understand something so important as the RTI,” says journalist Jyoti Katuwal, who writes for Kantipur Daily from Dailekh district.

Jyoti explains how journalists can play significant roles by not

not just writing on newspapers, or broadcasting on radio and television but also by organising knowledge-sharing seminars with the communities to share information about RTI, the procedures involved, sending appeals to NIC if they fail to get information, and so on.

NIC has been supporting journalists through SUCHANA II by organizing Training of Trainers (TOT) to enrich their knowledge about RTI. The training is aimed at helping and encouraging journalists to organize RTI-related information workshops and trainings for their own local communities.



*Journalist Jyoti Katuwal has a mission of building an informed society in her municipality Ward.
Photo -Kreeti Modi*

Journalists will also have substantial knowledge to produce quality contents on RTI issues to reach out to the mass.

“The TOT is a good initiative by NIC to train journalists, so that they can educate and inform the rural communities about RTI. I want to use the knowledge I gained from the training to produce stories, and share information at a massive scale,” says Jyoti, who attended a TOT programme organized by NIC through SUCHANA II in Karnali Pradesh.

Jyoti has a mission of building an informed society in her Aathabis

Municipality of Dailekh district. Some Wards of Aathabis are so remote that people don’t have access to newspapers and television. She aims to produce a series of knowledge contents on RTI, and broadcast them on local radio stations like Dhrubatar Radio, Radio Jwala and Radio Dullu, all which have wider reach to rural communities in the three districts of Accham, Dailekh and Kalikot.

“They deserve to know about their rights to demand information. So many Dalit families are not even aware of their entitlements. I want to make sure that my efforts will encourage them to demand for information from local government bodies,” says Jyoti. She further explains how the AIDS survivors are unaware of the government’s support for medical support. Where the government has been unable to reach crucial information for the communities, the journalists can fill in that vacuum, adds Jyoti.

“One of the best outcomes of SUCHANA II has been to engage the media in promoting RTI. This has contributed toward spreading information about RTI to public, considering wider coverage and outreach of national dailies,” explains Mohan.

Due to regular interactions with the editors, several local and national newspapers now have now designated their staff journalists as RTI beat reporters, ie, covering exclusively on RTI.

Nepali Journalists (FNJ) chapters in all 77 districts. The FNJ with support of SUCHANA II has been actively organising RTI activities in 45 districts.



*NIC has developed a good partnership with local journalists to promote right to information in their communities.
Photo -Kreeti Modi*

Teach them young

“The Government has provisioned various benefits and entitlements for the peoples of remote areas. But they lack information and are deprived of such benefits. NIC’s activities should reach them with the right information that helps them to get the benefits. “

**Information Commissioner, NIC
Yashoda Devi Timsina**

“One of NIC’s key milestones has been to include RTI curriculum both in the government’s training institutes, and also schools to make citizens aware about their RTI from a young age,” says SUCHANA II’s Project Manager, Mohan Raj Sharma.

In 2018, the RTI was successfully included in the social studies textbooks for the secondary (Grades 6-9), and has already started process to include higher secondary level (Grade



NIC is helping to build a society of informed young citizens about their right to demand information.

Photo - Narendra Shrestha

11) students in 34,000 public and community schools in all 77 districts. The teachers' guidebooks, which will support 245,000 teachers in teaching about the RTI in all classes, were also published in coordination with the government's Curriculum Development Centre (CDC), and has been handed over to the Teachers' Human Resource Development Centre (THRDC) in 2017.

"These teachers will play a key role in society by educating 8.5 million students about the RTI. This is where the GF's support has been highly significant," says Chief Commissioner Krishna Hari. He explains how the teachers now have the opportunity to build a society of informed young citizens by encouraging them to practice their rights to demand information from the public bodies. And, importantly, the youth have can also educate their own parents, and other adult Nepalis a lot about the RTI.

NIC's effort to build an informed society

"We appreciate the GF's efforts through SUCHANA Project to empower the citizens, strengthen the government public bodies, and contributing significantly towards enhancing NIC's capacity to run RTI initiatives."

Secretary, NIC
Mani Ram Ojha.

In 1990, Nepal became the first country in South Asia to formally recognize the RTI as a fundamental right provisioned in the Constitution of Nepal (1990). The RTI Act in Nepal was, however, only adopted in 2007. By 2009, Nepal also formulated RTI Regulations, and established the NIC in 2008 as the independent body to oversee the implementation of the RTI Act.

However, during the initial stage of RTI implementation,

the issue of Proactive Disclosure under the RTI Act largely remained unpublished. Even after seven years since its enactment (2007 to 2014), the level of awareness about the RTI Act and its regulations was low even among the government agencies, civil society organizations (CSOs) and the media. The citizens knew very little about the application procedures to demand for information, according to NIC. As a result, the volume of information requests was very negligible. Between 2008 and 2012, NIC received less than 300 requests for information.

Even up to 2015, RTI was not considered a priority for the government and the public bodies. There was a lack of qualified human resources, both in the government and at the CSOs, to organize awareness and promotional campaigns for RTI.

“It was especially the GF’s support that helped NIC to make headway progress in implementing RTI activities, and this has contributed towards NIC’s institutional strengthening,” says Chief Commissioner Krishna Hari. He believes that Nepal can achieve much more in promoting RTI with consolidated efforts of more high level government offices. NIC is not the sole regulatory body for implementing the RTI Act. He explained that the Prime Ministers office is also the RTI’s regulatory body. CIAA is indirectly its regulatory body, and even the CSOs are the regulatory bodies of the RTI Act.

By the citizens, for the citizens

"SUCHANA II with GF assistance is a good example of one of the successful projects in Nepal. It was a challenging task until few years ago. But now the project has started to demonstrate good results."

**National Project Director of
SUCHANA II Project and Joint
Secretary, NIC
Gita Kumari Homegain**

In many parts of the country, citizens themselves have been making their own endeavors with support of the CSOs and media to spread the importance of RTI to the rural communities. In Helambu Rural Municipality, for instance, local men and women from diverse caste and ethnic groups have formed a Citizens' Alliance that is helping to raise awareness about RTI.

"If one villager from a remote area is able to access

"Elected leaders and the government staff have the responsibility to educate the communities about their right to demand any information from the public bodies."

Deepa Bohara, Deputy Mayor of Aathabis Municipality of Karnali Pradesh.



information through his or her RTI, it will benefit the whole community with the valuable information they receive," says Hom Bahadur Bhujel, member of the Citizens Alliance in Ward-7 of Helambu Rural Municipality.

He shares how the Citizens Alliance went to the rural communities putting up information boards for the citizens to use their right to demand information.

"We went to our communities to explain that the RTI Act is now implemented, and they had all the rights to demand answers even from the Thulo Manche in the government office," explains Hom. He adds how the RTI had given a kind of new power to the people to hold the government bodies as well as public institutions, schools, and NGOs accountable and transparent.



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